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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 1 No. 6

1959

New Novels and Stories by Top Writers

Short Novels :

SHADOW OF THE SWORD

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Two leading Powers on Earth wanted the mysterious alien ship found on Triton - - but only Rick Scott with the help of a Jovian could thwart the Eastern Alliance.

GALACTIC GALAPAGOS.....Nelson Sherwood 51

The Colony was a paradise - - yet the emigrants were fighting a losing battle against the animals and insects. Someone had to save both from extinction.

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Their business was to produce dancing dolls, but behind the scenes they were an alien organisation waiting to take over Earth.

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Edited by JOHN CARNELL.

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THE EDITOR'S SPACE

This issue now in your hands is creating science fiction history in a quiet way. Previously, when the original American edition of a magazine being reprinted in Britain ceased publication the British edition had to die also, but when we heard the lamentable news that the American *SFA* had run into distribution troubles and was no longer to be published there, we decided that we had to do something about it. For, make no mistake, our edition (although starting quietly) was beginning to increase its circulation in leaps and bounds. British and Commonwealth readers have been letting us know in no uncertain terms that a first-class action-adventure magazine in the science fiction field was long overdue. At least in our part of the world.

So we immediately went ahead gathering material from British, Commonwealth and American writers to continue this first-class magazine on our own. The response to our request has been wonderful and already we are assured of sufficient stories for several issues to come. And those stories are *good* ! Probably better than the original American material published in our previous issues.

Take James White's lead short novel in the next issue, for instance. He wrote " Occupation : Warrior " to our requirements and came up with an outstandingly new idea for solving interplanetary differences. *Including* a wonderful land battle on an alien planet which would give our present-day generals food for thought ! Nelson Sherwood came in with his second fine story " The Sun Creator " —and this one has all the necessary ingredients for a fast-moving story, with a lost spaceship imprisoned under a planetary ice-cap.

Looking a bit further into the future is even more exciting, editorially—there will be a new Calvin M. Knox story—but time's up. I'll see you again right here next month.

—John Carnell

Shadow of the Sword

by

WYNNE WHITEFORD

To avert a war on Earth two people had to pit their wits against the science of an alien culture.

Illustrated by Lewis



Australian writer Wynne Whiteford is a newcomer to science fiction although he has had many stories published in his own country. Now living in London he has quickly shown that he can produce all the ingredients of action and suspense necessary for a fast moving story.

SHADOW OF THE SWORD

Chapter 1

The blood thundered in Scott's ears as the speed of the centrifuge built steadily up. The light took on a reddish tinge as he deliberately pushed the spring-loaded lever further along the slot.

It took all his strength to inflate his lungs, to lift his chest against the crushing weight of the artificial gravity induced by the spin. When he breathed out, the air rasped from his throat in a fierce gust—and then the fight to inhale began again.

With the dial of the accelerometer blurred out of focus, he pushed the lever further, and again further, until the gravity forced him down into a hell of roaring darkness . . .

" All right ?" asked Hart as they lifted him out of the centrifuge.

Scott grunted. He wanted to say : " How much did I take ?" But right now the effort of speech was too great.

" You did fine. Fine !" Hart's voice was exultant. He turned away. " Bring the car here," he shouted. He took Scott by the arm. " Sorry to hurry you like this, but the Chief wants you at H.Q. right away. Some emergency came up."

Scott nodded, still breathing heavily as they helped him into the car, his heart thumping solidly. Hart sat beside him in the rear seat, and an armed Security guard rode beside the driver. All the way to Strategic Command Headquarters the four of them remained silent.

When they arrived, Scott's heart and lungs were functioning almost normally. An elevator took them far underground, and then Captain Hart led Scott through a network of brightly-lit corridors to a massive door. Beside it stood two Security guards.

Hart gave a brief command, and the door slid open. They went through into a large, austerely furnished room.

" Captain Scott, sir," announced Hart.

A heavy, bronzed man with iron-grey hair and metallic eyes looked up from behind a wide desk. Scott recognised him as General Risdon, Chief of Strategic Command.

" Sit down, Scott." The General indicated a chair in front of his desk, and dismissed Hart with a brief nod. " Just received the results of your G-test. Very satisfactory. Liked to have given you more time to recover. Couldn't, unfortunately. Matter of top priority emergency."

Scott nodded. He wished his temples were not still throbbing from the effects of the centrifuge.

" Briefly," said Risdon, " the project calls for a long voyage in the minimum possible time. That means a building-up of velocity with the highest possible acceleration—and your ability to withstand acceleration effects was one of the factors that led to your selection. The other was your knowledge of electronics."

" A long voyage," said Scott. " Might I ask where ?"

Risdon looked at him fixedly for a few seconds before replying. " Triton."

" Triton ?" Scott sat more erect. " The larger satellite of Neptune ? Isn't the second expedition just back ?"

" Right. This journey of yours won't be a normal expedition. Extreme emergency."

" Could you give me a few details ?"

" First, are you willing to make the voyage ? There will be only two of you aboard the ship, and the other man is not a member of the Service. But he's an experienced spaceman. You'll meet him in a few minutes—I'm having him brought here."

" Okay if you're satisfied with him. I can get along with anyone."

Risdon took a cigar from a box on his desk and lit it before continuing. " No need to bring you up to date on the international situation, of course. Deteriorating week by week. The Alliance is matching us fairly evenly in equipment and production—in fact, it's no secret they may have a slight edge in electronic control techniques at the moment. There has been some criticism of the money spent on our explorative expeditions over the past years, you know."

" I thought all exploration was cancelled."

" Right. We came in for a lot of criticism when Willmore took the second expedition to Triton a week after the first got back. We couldn't give a reason, what's more. But I can give you part of that reason now. You'll find out for yourself when you reach Triton, anyway."

" Mineral deposits ?" suggested Scott.

Risdon shook his head. " Buildings." He looked squarely at Scott, watching the effect of the word sink in.

" You mean the Eastern Alliance beat us to it ?"

Again Risdon shook his head. " These buildings were not put there by the Alliance. Or by any—" He broke off at the sound of a buzzer, touching a switch on the intercom on his desk. He listened for a moment. " Send him in," he said, releasing the switch.

" Your crew-mate is on his way in. Here in a couple of minutes. By the way, he's from Jupiter Development. For this run we're using the new ship we just finished building for them."

" Why not one of our cruisers ?"

" We need the utmost acceleration. This J4 has a tremendously powerful blast—has to, to be able to bring any sort of payload up from the gravity-field of Jupiter. And every hour may count in the time between takeoff from Earth and arrival on Triton."

" Why the urgency ?"

" The second expedition was investigating the buildings found on Triton by the first. Willmore took Professor Harlow out with him. Heard of him ? Archaeologist. Probably top man in his field. Did all the work on the ruins around Lacus Solis."

" I've heard of him, yes."

" He stayed on Triton. Found something he considered of military value. Radioed us in code. The Alliance picked up the message, apparently cracked the code in a day or two.

They had a ship out beyond Jupiter's orbit, by the damndest luck—and they've ordered it to Triton. We could only beat it by using J4. This fellow who'll be flying with you is one of the Jovians who came to collect it. John Galt. Son of the original families who settled the Red Area on Jupiter. Born there. Grew up under 2½G all the time. Fantastic ability to stand acceleration." Risdon glanced up as light glowed over the door. " This should be him now."

He pressed a button, and the door opened. Three men filed in. The first and third wore the dark blue uniform of the Security Guard, but it was the second man who immediately caught Scott's attention. It was the first time he had seen a man who had grown up under the weird gravitational conditions of the pressure-dome colonies on Jupiter. He was short, stocky, immensely powerful, moving with a vigorous, bounding energy. His voice boomed through the room the moment he entered.

" What are they doing to our ship ?" He planted himself in front of Risdon's desk, bulldog jaw thrust forward, eyes blazing.

Risdon waved calmly to Scott. " Meet Captain Rick Scott. Scott, this is John Galt, of Jupiter Development."

Galt took no more notice of Scott than of the walls. He slammed a massive hand on the desk. " I ask a question, I expect an answer, damn you. What about our ship ?"

Risdon tapped the ash from his cigar. " An emergency has come up. We've had to commandeer the J4 for—"

" Commandeer !" Galt's voice was a clap of thunder. " Are you trying to tell me there's a war ?"

" Not yet," said Risdon coldly. " But a serious emergency has arisen. I suggest you listen to what I have to say."

Galt hesitated ; he ran his fingers through his startlingly red hair. " It had better be good."

Risdon told him very much the story he had told Scott. As he spoke, Scott looked sidelong at Galt. He was wearing a grey leatheroid tunic that stretched tightly over a massive, chunky body, revealing arms of superhuman power—they looked short because of their immense thickness of muscle. His movements were tense, lightning-fast, his whole attitude a threat of explosive violence.

Scott had worked in space with many men, men of diverse temperaments. But he could think of none he would less like

than Galt as a partner on a voyage almost to the outer rim of the Solar System. He began to like the project less and less.

" The ship has not been radically altered," Risdon was concluding. " Extra fuel containers in the cargo space—that's all. We want you to fly it with Captain Scott to Triton and back. That's all."

Galt flung his arms wide in a sudden gesture of volcanic fury. "" The ship's paid for ! If I take it up, I take it to Jupiter ! Nowhere else !"

" Is that your final decision ?" Risdon's eyes were like ice.

" *Yes* !" The word crashed through the room

Risdon ground his cigar into the ashtray. " I'm sorry, Galt. I'll have to place you under temporary arrest."

The two guards moved forward. Galt seized the nearer of the two, flung him the length of the room. He spun to face the second guard with a movement so swift that Scott had the impression of watching a cut film, in which a figure seemed to move instantaneously from one position to another. But the second guard had time to draw a gun. Galt looked at it levelly for a few seconds, then shrugged his vast shoulders.

" Okay," he said. " But this doesn't finish here."

Two other guards entered at Risdon's signal. He indicated Galt. " Take him away," he said quietly.

They went out, Galt silent, smouldering. Scott and Risdon walked across and lifted the stunned guard to his feet. The room seemed suddenly quiet.

" What happened ?" The guard rubbed the back of his head. " Remember the guy picking me up. That's about all."

Risdon called a man from the door. " Take him down to the M.O.," he said.

When he was alone with Scott, he shook his head. " These Jovian types are tough. Could use a few as commandos, if they weren't so damned unpredictable." He looked at his watch. " Might have to rely on you and one of our other boys taking the flight on your own. We'll try this fellow's partner, but he'll probably have the same attitude. Haven't met him yet. We only dealt with Galt. Let's get down to the launching pit. The sooner you look at the J4 the better."

They travelled to the shipyard in Risdon's private air-car. The J4 was standing in a great circular launching pit, bathed in cold indirect light. The sliding roof of the pit shut off the view of the night sky.

Scott was amazed at the bore of the quadruple blast-tubes jutting from the J4's short thick hulk. Somehow the ship reminded him of Galt, with its thick compactness, its obvious potential power.

He went aboard with Dean, the engineer in charge of the modifications. He pointed out the massive fuel containers built into the former cargo-hold, then led the way up the ladder to the control-room.

" Not much space for two men," explained Dean. " These ships are only meant for the run between the Red Area on Jupiter and Ganymede. Not a long haul. There's space for one man to sleep, behind the control-room. You might have to bend your knees up, but it's all we can do."

The left set of controls had been changed from Jovian to standard specifications. " How long to switch over the other controls ?" asked Risdon when Dean and Scott rejoined him on the ground.

" Couple of hours," said Dean.

" Get all the parts you need on hand. We may have to do it."

Scott looked up at the ship. It's outline was vindictive, ominous.

" Terrific thrust, these motors," said Dean. " D'you know, these ships operate on 16 and 18G when they're climbing out of Jupiter's gravity-field. They tell me—"

All three of them turned at the sound of a commotion near the elevator. A short, energetic girl in a blue cloak came quickly forward, the light gleaming on her red-gold hair. One of the Security men barred her way. She looked up at him angrily, stamping her foot to emphasise something she said to him. He shook his head. Suddenly she put her hand on his chest and shoved him aside. He reeled back half a dozen paces, and the girl stormed across towards Risdon and Scott.

" What have you done with my brother ?" she demanded in a surprisingly resonant voice. She stood looking up at Risdon, the top of her head level with his chest, her eyes flashing. " I'm Brenda Galt. We've paid for this ship, and we're flying it home."

Risdon looked stonily down at her flushed, upturned face. " Miss Galt, your brother attacked one of my men. We've been forced to detain him. As to the ship, we've been compelled to commandeer it."

" *What* ?" Her voice echoed from the cement walls of the pit.

Risdon outlined what had happened. The girl listened, her anger abating somewhat, although her mouth remained set in a firm line. Scott decided to risk Risdon's disapproval and take a hand in the conversation.

" We realise it inconveniences your people for a while. But we'd appreciate it if you'd help us."

With the same tense swiftness of movement as her brother, the girl pivoted on her high platform shoes to look at Scott for the first time. " Well," she said. " If it's as vital as you say . . . Who else would be aboard ?"

" I would."

Her eyes swept over him. " The takeoff will probably kill you. Do you mind ?"

" Yes. But the General has promised me a splendid funeral."

Unexpectedly she laughed—a deep, rich, vibrant laugh with no restraint in it. " I like that." She turned back to Risdon. " If I do this for you, what happens to John ?"

" He'll be released when you return. Of course, you must realise he has committed an offence. We can't ignore that." He managed to smile. " Not completely."

" When will the ship be ready to travel ?"

" Dawn tomorrow."

The girl nodded. " All right. I'll do it." She turned to Scott. " I didn't get your name."

" Captain Scott. Otherwise Rick."

" You can call me Bren." Scott held out his hand, and she gripped it with astonishing quickness and strength. " See you here in the morning," she said.

She spun round and strode rapidly towards the elevator, the high heels of her platform shoes clicking hard on the concrete.

" Well," said Risdon, " There's your crew. Believe they've only ten pilots in Jupiter Development. I'd heard three of them were women, but I didn't believe it. Don't let that smile get you off guard. When we started the Jupiter colony, we didn't realise we were starting a different kind of human being. Dangerous to work with. Necessary right now, but dangerous. Like a fusion bomb."

Chapter II

The morning was clear and fresh. The sliding roof had been rolled back from the launching pit, and the sharp nose of the ship pointed towards the lightening sky. Scott was already in the heavy spacesuit he would wear for the takeoff, the tough plastic bubble helmet under his arm.

He heard quick, firm steps on the cement behind him, and turned as Bren Galt joined him. The close-fitting spacesuit made her body look compact, dynamic. The expression in her eyes was unreadable.

" Ready ?" asked Scott.

" Any time."

Within minutes, they were strapped in the twin control-seats, the narrow chart-table between them.

" Since you're used to high-gravity acceleration, you take her during the initial lift. Okay ?"

" Right. Can you stand 16 G's ?"

" Don't know. Never been tested that high in the centrifuge. Might black out."

" Doesn't matter. I've taken that in every lift we've made from Jupiter's surface. Just relax."

Waiting for the count-down, Scott found he was sweating. He glanced across at the short, unbelievably strong figure beside him. In profile the girl's face looked surprisingly young, with its short, upturned nose. He watched her gloved hands checking the feel of the controls. The right hand was quick and supple. The left one was curiously rigid at the wrist, its fingers and thumb stiffly curved. It kept the same immobility as she used it to push and pull the lever of the blast-regulator.

" What happened to your hand ?" he asked.

She looked at him quickly. " Heating in a suit burned out. Frostbite. Happens easily on Jupiter." She lifted it. " This is plastic. Works all right, though. Don't worry."

He hadn't time. A moment later the control officer's voice came through the radio, checking with him. Then the count-down. As the voice reached zero, Bren Galt touched the firing-button.

The ship shuddered with the ignition of the rockets, and then, in an incredibly short time, it was airborne, driving up on full blast. The acceleration flattened him in his seat, slamming him into blackness quicker than any centrifuge test or actual takeoff he had ever experienced. For minutes that were like

days, he knew nothing but the screaming thunder of rockets and atmospheric friction on the hull, and then the thunder died away, leaving only the high, sustained shriek of the blast driving into the vacuum of outer space.

He heard a voice calling his name. " Rick ! Rick !"

He wondered whether he had dreamed it. It came again.

" Rick ! This is Bren."

" Okay," he said. He had to force the sound out through his clenched teeth.

" I'm stepping up the blast. Okay ?"

" Okay," he answered, without absorbing the full meaning. The pressure slammed down harder on him, and the inferno of sound seemed to close in on him. Somehow he remained conscious, at least in the sense of being aware that he still existed, although he was unconscious of anything about him. How long it lasted he didn't know, but after an eternity the weight abruptly lifted. The scream of the blast died in a hollow, spluttering crash that seemed to echo through his skull.

He lay still, feeling the heavy pounding of his heart, feeling his ribs creak as he drew air into his lungs again in deep gulps. His head seemed to spin in a red mist.

" Are you all right ?" he asked.

" Of course." Incredibly, she laughed. " You did better than I thought. Have to come to Jupiter some time."

He watched the interior of the cabin emerge from the blur, parts of it striped with white-hot sunlight, the rest in ebon shadow. He touched the button that closed the filters over the small ports. The quiet hum of the gyros, the purr of the fans sounded almost hypnotic. With an effort, he switched on the rear vision-screen, focussing with the dials on the receding image of the Earth. A thin, reddish crescent of refracted sunlight flared along one side of its shadowed disc. He checked the radar-pulse, and read off the rapidly growing distance.

" Dead on course. Dead on schedule," he said.

" Naturally." Her voice showed neither surprise nor warmth.

He checked the pressure in the cabin, then switched off his helmet radio and removed the helmet, releasing the straps holding him in the control-seat. With the gyros he gave the ship a sufficiently fast axial spin to get a reading of three-tenths G on the accelerometer at three feet above the floor of the cabin —enough to enable them to walk about comfortably, and to

help the normal circulation of air within the ship. The outer television cameras and radar gear were set to automatically compensate for the spin.

He climbed out of his spacesuit, stretching his arms. Bren Galt watched him from the other control-seat. He was wearing his regulation shirt and shorts, and her eyes fixed on the small automatic pistol at his belt.

" Why the gun ?" she asked.

" Regulations," he said without flicking an eyelash.

She curled the corner of her lip in an almost imperceptible expression of disgust, and zipped open her spacesuit, getting out of it quickly although she had to manage it one-handed. She shook her head almost angrily as he reached across to help her, and he returned to his checking of the instruments.

This, he thought, was going to be the most unpleasant journey of his career. Last night, he had thought of the idea of a sixty-day journey with a woman as a vaguely exciting contrast to the normal routine of a two-man flight. But now ?

He watched her fold her spacesuit and stow it in her locker. She was wearing a green leatheroid tunic that left her limbs bare. Her short, strong body was fantastically swift in its movements, with the effortless swiftness of a powerful animal, intensely specialised to the crushing gravitational field in which she had grown up. Her right arm was stronger than an Earth-born man's, its hand moving with the lightning precision of a striking snake. The left arm was mostly of smooth, flesh-coloured plastic, specialised so that she could push and pull the blast-regulator levers of a ship by movements of her shoulder, but useful for little else.

Scott took a sighting on the Earth, and another on Jupiter, thirty degrees off their course to the left. Mars, Saturn and Uranus were scattered round their orbits on the far side of the Sun, so that the way out to Neptune's orbit would be empty apart from asteroids and meteoric matter. He marked their position on the three-dimensional charts.

" Would you check the course ?" he asked.

With an unnaturally quick, bounding movement, she was at his side. She focussed the points of reference efficiently on the cross-lines of the screen, her hand flashing from one positioning dial to the other. She transferred the co-ordinates directly to the slide-rule, working it skilfully between her fingers then spinning round to check his markings on the charts.

" That's all right," she said, slipping the rule back into its case.

They agreed to split their watches at the controls into alternating periods of five hours. She was used to a ten-hour day on the Red Area of Jupiter, in which she was active for a little over six hours, asleep for a little under four. Whoever was off duty slept in the cramped bunk in the computer-room behind the control cabin.

In most flights Scott had made on two-man ships, the first few watches were crammed with conversation, especially when the team had not been together in space before. Here, though, there was little communication between them. Most of the time one was in the cabin, the other in the computer-room.

As Scott was an hour off the end of his fifth watch, he heard her moving about in the computer-room, and in a few minutes she came through into the cabin.

" Couldn't sleep," she said. " Think I'll heat some coffee."

" Heat another bulb for me," he said.

" All right." She got a second bulb of coffee from the storage compartment and took it to the filament heater. Putting the bulbs in place, she switched on, turning with her usual flashing movement to look at Scott.

" Aren't you tired of carrying that gun ?"

" Regulations."

She crossed to the chart-table alongside his seat and looked into his face. " What are you afraid of ? Me ?"

He stared coldly back into her steady eyes. " Part of our training is to stick to regulations. That's all."

She stayed there a few seconds, then flung herself away from the table and back to the heater, her back towards him. The whole movement had a more-than-human speed and power in it, the effortless action of immensely powerful muscles working well within their capacity. He looked at her short, broad back, with the swelling curves of smooth muscle under the green leatheroid tunic, the red-gold head proudly erect above the strong shoulders. Surreptitiously, he checked for the tenth time that his gun was free in its holster.

She switched off the heater and crossed to the table, holding out the coffee bulbs between her fingers. He took one and they both drank in silence. She took his coffee bulb when he had finished it, put both into the disposal chute, then vaulted up onto the edge of the chart table, sitting close alongside him.

" Mind if we talk for a while ?"

" Why not ?"

She looked down at the chart. " Where's Jupiter right now ?"

" Over here." He switched the telescopic viewing-screen to full magnification, and spun the dials until the small, bright disc of the giant planet came into the field, flanked by four bright starlike points of its major satellites and a ragged line of fainter specks.

She looked at it for a moment. " You can just see Amalthea off the bright side," she said. " You get a terrific view from there. Jupiter's a huge globe nearly filling the sky."

Scott decided to keep the conversation flowing. " What's it like down on the Red Spot ?"

" Red Area ! Not Spot ! There's over a hundred and fifty million square miles of it—three times all the land area on your Earth."

" All solid hydrogen ?"

" Not all. But that's the base of it—an iceberg of solidified gases, thirty-thousand miles long, floating in an atmosphere that's compressed down below it to a higher density than any of your Earth liquids. Of course, conditions are quite different there. Ice is like permanent rock, hard as iron. Some of your liquids are like metals there."

While talking she had taken a pencil from its clip and was figuring on a scratch pad.

" You live in sealed buildings all the time ?"

" No. We go about in pressure-suits and pressurised vehicles a lot." He tried to see what she had been calculating, but she tore the sheet from the pad and crumpled it.

On the hour, Scott turned over the watch to her, and went into the computer-room. It was a long time before he fell asleep, and then he awakened at once when he heard her moving about the cabin. She was quiet after a while, and he slept.

When he went into the cabin for the next watch, she was sitting in the control seat where he had last seen her.

" Everything okay ?" he asked.

" Yes. Except that something spluttered up forward. Sounded as if something fused. I couldn't find anything wrong."

He went forward and looked behind the panels at the maze of wires. He tested the instruments one by one.

" Somewhere in the wiring of the meteor-detector," he said. " I'll rig up a bridge and find where the short is."

" I thought of doing that," she said. " But I decided to let you do it." With a movement of her shoulder she bent the plastic arm. " I can fix most things, but not wiring."

He had to get behind the panels to locate the fault. She passed him in the tools he needed, while he squirmed into a more comfortable position in the cramped space.

" That should hold it," he said at last. " Now to get out of here."

He froze as a deep, steady hum grew in volume in the rear of the ship. Fuel pumps. Frantically he slid back through the narrow space between the panels and the bulkhead. When he emerged he saw Bren Galt sitting at the controls, her face pale and set.

" What—" he shouted, but without waiting for the pumps to build full pressure she slammed the regulator lever right forward.

The ship leaped as though under the impact of a vast hammer. Scott spun the length of the cabin and cannoned into the rear wall . . .

The impact must have stunned him. How long he was unconscious he didn't know, but when he opened his eyes the ship was silent again. He was lying on the floor, with the short, vigorous figure of the girl bending over him. As soon as he blinked, something hit him hard under the angle of the jaw, and for a while he was aware only of spinning blackness.

When he awoke fully, his head throbbed heavily. He tried to move, but tight bands held him motionless. Looking down, he found that he was sitting in one of the control seats—tied there. Tied by yards of heavy insulated cable, bound round his wrists, his ankles, his entire body. He had barely grasped the situation when the pressure of acceleration came on, blacking him out almost at once with a thunderous roar of rockets.

He must have stayed unconscious long after the blast ceased. When he was finally able to turn his head, he looked across at the other seat. His eyes met Bren's.

" We've altered course," she told him.

He said nothing. She looked at him as though she expected comment. " This is our ship," she said at length. " Designed and built to our specifications, paid for by us. By Jupiter

Development. We have to have it. We only have three ships, and the cargo space of the three together doesn't equal this one's. Your Strategic Command can't get it into their thick heads that our set-up can't exist without trade. *We've got to have this ship*—do you understand? It took all our resources to buy it."

"You should have thought twice. There's a war about to break."

"War? We're not interested in Earth politics."

He let her rage on for minute after minute. When she had talked herself out, he looked across at her again.

"Remember one thing. Security is still holding your brother."

"Let them. I've no time for him. He's my half-brother, anyway. There are only a few families down home. I only worked with him because it was the only chance to get into space." She lifted the plastic arm. "I used to be a better pilot than he was, before this. And this was his fault, too. Lent me a suit with faulty heating-wires in the sleeve. I was never quite sure whether he did it on purpose—we were both in the running for Chief Pilot of the J3, and I think I would have got it. I had to walk home a mile over solid hydrogen at near absolute zero with frostbite. But he didn't care."

Scott was silent for a while. "Are you going to leave me tied up all the way down?"

"Nothing else I can do, is there?" Suddenly she got out of the seat and moved across, standing in front of him. He noticed that she had his automatic pistol strapped at her waist. "Sorry about this. I've got nothing against you personally."

"Forget it," he said sarcastically.

"I think you'll be all right on the Red Area. The first settlers were Earth-born, and they managed to adapt to 2½ G."

"Thanks."

Chapter III

Bren sat at the controls for a straight six hours, then switched the radar onto audio-alarm. She brought the bunk from the computer room and set it up in the small clear space in the middle of the cabin, lashing it to the chart-table supports and the instrument panels with lengths of the same type of insulated

cable as she had used to bind Scott. He watched her tie the ends with her single hand, his eyes narrowed. She relied on twisting the cables together, letting the stiffness of the twisted lengths hold them in place. This could be the only way she had tied him. A steady pressure might just possibly suffice to untwist the ends.

Her movements had lost some of their vigour, and her eyes were darkly shadowed. He remembered that she lived by a ten-hour day, and decided that Jovian-born people might have evolved a different rate of metabolism. At any rate, she looked more fatigued than he had seen her look before.

She went into the computer room for a few minutes, and returned wearing a loose plastic-foam wrap, walking barefooted, and carrying the plastic arm by the straps that normally secured it to her body. She took Scott's automatic from the pocket of her wrap, put it beside the bunk within easy reach, and lay down. She looked at him with insolent, half-closed eyes for a while, then suddenly was asleep.

He watched the steady rise and fall of her deep chest for a time, then began putting as much pressure as he could on his bonds. He had been right. They yielded slightly.

He kept working at them, sweating. After half an hour, the cables were quite loose. In three-quarters of an hour, he had his hands free. Watching the sleeping figure closely, he freed his legs and body, stretching his limbs silently to get the circulation back to normal.

Bren rolled over in her sleep, her hand on the opposite side of the bunk from the gun. Scott rose to his feet and moved slowly across.

In a flash she was awake, her hand on the gun even as he dived for it. He got one hand on the barrel of the gun, the other on her wrist, putting all his strength into forcing the gun round to bend her wrist inward. She screamed in sheer fury, throwing him off balance with a violent roll of her body, but he kept up his pressure on her wrist. A second later he was standing back, the automatic in his hand.

" Get up," he said curtly.

She sprang to her feet, looking down at her wrist and flexing her hand.

" Into the seat," he said. " And strap yourself in."

She climbed into the right control-seat, fastening the straps about her. He made her put her arm behind the seat, pulled the sleeve of the plastic-foam wrap down over her wrist, and

bound her forearm to the support of the seat with a length of the same insulated cable she had used to bind him. He made sure he knotted it so that she couldn't free herself.

" We're altering course again," he told her.

" You haven't enough fuel left."

" We've enough to make a landing on Triton, and still use enough speed to get there on time. We can always make a slow trip back. But by the time I've changed course again, we won't have enough to get down on Jupiter without a crack-up. Remember that."

Sullenly, she struggled to free her arm, lips compressed in a tight line. He plotted a fresh course, checking his sightings and calculations carefully. By the time he had finished she had given up struggling and was sitting with tears glistening in her eyes. She turned her face away from him as she saw him looking at her.

Scott shrugged, swung the ship with the gyros, and blasted at 10-G for the calculated time. He might have built more speed by taking it higher, but he couldn't risk a blackout at this stage.

With the blast finished, he checked his course again. They would probably lose twenty hours by the changes of direction in the total journey, but little more.

" What are you going to do with me ?" demanded Bren.

" Haven't decided, yet," he said calmly.

He obviously couldn't leave her tied there for the entire two-thousand million miles between here and Triton. Yet she had run away with the ship once, and she was probably quite capable of killing him. He had to sleep some of the time.

He picked up the plastic arm from near the bunk. " You might as well give me that back," she said. " There's no point in my giving you any more trouble. We can't make a Jupiter landing now."

Without answering, he stowed the arm in his locker, locking it in and putting the key in his pocket. She gave no sign of anger beyond a slight narrowing and brightening of her eyes.

He checked the fuel supply carefully, and figured the amount needed for a landing on Jupiter. When he was certain it was impossible, he showed her the figures, dropping the pad in her lap.

He lit a cigarette as she studied the calculations. " I don't have to ask you to promise to co-operate," he said. " I just want you to see there's nothing else you can do. I could leave you tied there."

" I've told you there's no point in my giving you further trouble." Her voice was unexpectedly quiet. " If you wouldn't mind . . ." She indicated her bound arm with her head.

Scott released the cables binding her arm. She flexed it carefully, wincing slightly. " Thank you," she said in the same subdued voice.

He kept the radar switched on audio-alarm. They were well past the main asteroid belt now with only the orbits of the relatively scarce beyond-Jupiter asteroids ahead of them, and odd meteoric debris.

They settled into a routine again, Scott always watchful. He slept in the computer room, the gun always close to hand, and an alarm improvised secretly inside the doorway. They spoke little, except for routine questions and answers about course and calculations.

A hundred hours beyond Jupiter's orbit, the long-range radar suddenly went out of action, the bright swinging line of light motionless across the screen.

" Scanner's stopped spinning," said Scott.

" But why ?" Bren moved alongside him.

" Probably a fleck of meteoric dust hitting the bearings or the spindle, or even the motor housing. A thing smaller than a pin's head would be enough. Impact would vapourise it, and the heat would do the rest."

" What happens now ?"

" Normally, I'd go out on the hull in magnetic boots and free it."

" Normally ?" She frowned. " I see. You think once you're outside I'd give the rockets a flick, and leave you adrift. Is that it ?"

" That's exactly it. We'll run without it."

She shook her head. " I couldn't do that."

He looked at her fixedly. " There's too much to lose. It's not me. It might make all the difference to the survival of the Federation."

" Aren't you taking a bigger risk in running without radar?"

" I don't think so."

She turned her back and went out of the cabin. Scott looked at the useless radar screen, then switched off. He felt uncertain. The outer belts of the Solar System were still only sketchily charted. There were still occasional meteor swarms, isolated lumps of rock, even straggling asteroids out this far.

He began to make an attempt to figure the statistical chances of a collision with an object large enough to do major damage to the ship, but his data was insufficient for a conclusive result.

After some minutes, something black and glossy caught the edge of his vision in the doorway. It was Bren in her spacesuit, her bubble helmet under her arm.

" Better help me on with this helmet," she said. " Then let me out the airlock. I think I can trust you not to blast away from under me, can't I ?"

He went over to her ; her face was pale, her lips set.

" Have you ever worked outside a ship in free fall ?" he asked.

" Yes. On a run down from Ganymede."

He wondered whether it was an act. He took the helmet and locked it on, connecting her suit-radio through to the ship. He got a kit of tools and harnessed them to her. Without speaking, she walked into the airlock as he opened the inner door. Her face was white but still resolute as he closed the door.

" All right ?" he asked through the radio.

" Okay," her voice came back to him.

He waited a minute, then got into his own spacesuit and fitted the helmet into place. With the gyros, he killed the axial spin of the ship, and in zero gravity moved towards the airlock again.

Maybe he was taking an unreasonable chance. Trusting his judgment beyond wisdom. He opened the airlock door again.

" What's wrong ?" she demanded.

" Come inside. I'm going out."

She hesitated, then moved out of the lock. " I could do it."

" I'll do it. If anything goes wrong over there, carry on to Triton and contact Professor Harlow from orbit. The waveband and call-sign are on the pad on the chart-table. He'll tell you what to do."

He eased into the lock. " By the way," he said. " The key of my locker is on the table, too."

She closed the inner door, and he watched the red light come on as the pressure dropped.

" Suit holding pressure ?" she called through the radio.

" Okay."

The outer door opened. Scott climbed cautiously out onto the steel shell of the outer hull, his magnetic boots clanking on the smooth surface. The vastness, the emptiness were breathtaking, with the coldly brilliant shower of the Milky Way slanting off to a seemingly infinite distance like a waterfall without beginning or end. The Sun was far off, a shrunken, white-hot ball against the greenish spear-points of the corona.

He moved slowly towards the pointed nose of the ship, spiralling round out of sight of the airlock until the radar scanner came into view. He found the trouble soon enough —a fused streak of metal jamming a bearing, where some minute fragment of matter had struck head-on at a combined velocity of five-hundred miles a second. He removed the bearing housing and filed the droplets of re-solidified metal away. The job of re-assembling the housing in thick electrically heated gloves was difficult and tedious.

" Try it," he said at last into the radio.

The scanner began its regular spin, throwing its parabolic beam round and round with a complex weaving motion to take in a three-dimensional sweep of surrounding space.

" Rick !"

" What is it ?"

" Screen's picking something up. Ahead."

He felt suddenly cold, glancing involuntarily ahead into the nothingness between him and the unwinking stars. " How far ?"

" Almost extreme range. Better come in fast."

" Coming now." He moved back towards the airlock. The outer door was open, and he felt a sudden trembling as he eased between the steel walls, pressing the button. The outer door closed, and he waited for the green light to show equalisation of air-pressure. When the inner door opened, he moved quickly into the bright interior of the ship, stripping off his suit and moving forward into the cabin.

Weight gradually returned as he began the axial spin again. Bren was standing at the radar screen, and he crossed to her side.

The range of the screen was three astronomical units, and the faint blip was almost touching the edge of the screen. " Shouldn't we be closing on it quicker than this ?" asked Bren.

" Should. This thing's moving the same way as us."

" A ship ?"

" The Alliance ship. Couldn't be anything else." He took his slide-rule and made a series of rapid shifts with it, jotting on a pad. " On this course, we'd pass within a tenth of this distance of it."

" How far does their radar reach ?"

" Don't know." He turned to the chart-table, looking at the long, slightly curved line of their present path intersecting the similar line of Neptune's orbit. " We could use the rest of our reserve fuel to diverge. That would bring us to our mark at an earlier point on its orbit. Keep us further away from the other ship. Wouldn't leave us much in hand on landing, that's all."

Bren put her hand in her pocket. " By the way, you left your gun behind when you went outside. Do you want it ?" She took it from her pocket and held it out to him, balancing it on her palm.

He stood for a long time looking at her. Then, with a sudden easing of tension, he laughed. For the first time on the voyage, they laughed together. He took the gun, picked up the key of the locker from the table, unlocked it and tossed the gun inside. He took out the plastic arm and held it out to her. " You may as well have this back."

" Thanks." She hung it near her seat.

He made rapid calculations, and fed data into the computers. Then he positioned the ship carefully with the gyros and delivered the short, accurately measured blast to deflect them on to their new line of intersection with Triton's orbit.

" When we get there," he said, " we've got to make a perfect approach run—the first time. We can't spare fuel for a second try, or we'll never get off again."

" We'll make it," she said confidently.

" It's going to need a very high intensity blast for deceleration. Will you handle that ?"

" Don't worry. You've got one of the best high-acceleration pilots you could get." She smiled. " You know, I think we make a good team."

" Best the Federation could find," he said. He extended his hand, and she shook it gravely.

" I like you a lot better without the gun," she said irrelevantly.

The radar blip of the other ship slanted away at an angle across the screen as they gradually overhauled it, passing it on the side away from the ecliptic. Through the long hours in which it fell gradually astern out of their range, Scott checked its position at regular intervals to watch for any acceleration or change of course. But he could detect nothing.

" Think they picked up our blip ?" asked Bren as they were almost beyond range.

" No sign of it. But that might be deliberate."

In the forward screen, Neptune was still only a bright greenish star, with the backdrop of other stars dusting the immense darkness beyond.

They settled into a routine again, but this time without tension. Watch followed watch with the distant greenish spot of light showing no perceptible growth on the screen, though the temperature of the ship dropped steadily as they travelled further from the Sun.

To conserve power used in heating the cabin, Scott decided that they would use heated clothing for the remainder of the voyage out. He changed into his regulation suit of skin-tight black plastic, adjusting the temperature of the fine mesh of insulated filaments within its fabric. Bren put on her own more colourful garments in the computer-room, and returned in a pair of boots-cum-trousers and a hooded coat of blue synthetic fur. As she entered the cabin in this outfit Scott stared slightly.

" What's the matter ?" she asked. " Forgotten I was a woman ?" She crossed over to him. " Could you plug in this glove ?"

He took the supple crimson plastic glove and held it so that she could thrust her hand into it, feeling the strong movement of her fingers. She stood quietly as he plugged the heating wires into the sleeve.

" You know," she said, " you're the only man who's ever been able to handle me, apart from a Jovian. If anyone had told me an Earthman could take a gun out of my hand I wouldn't have believed it."

" Science can count more than strength," he said.

" Maybe. Science—or will-power. You know, you're quite a guy."

" Thanks," he said non-committally. He picked up the slide-rule, made a few quick shifts with it, and marked a few points on his charts. She watched the rapid, effective movement of his hands.

" You married ?" she asked suddenly.

" No."

" Someone waiting for you back home ?"

" No-one.".

" I see."

He looked after her as she moved across the cabin and began focussing the vision-screen. The hooded coat of blue fur and the crimson glove added a feminine touch that somehow didn't look as out of place as he would have expected.

They ate their meal together, silent most of the time. " Do you mind telling me something ?" she asked suddenly.

" Go ahead and ask."

" When the radar jammed—you didn't have to go out there yourself. Why did you stop me ?"

He shrugged. " It was my job—that's all."

She looked at him steadily. " Was it because you didn't think I could do it ?"

He shook his head. " It wasn't a job for a woman."

" Think I need protecting ? Under Earth gravity I could lift three times my own weight with my one hand."

" You're still a woman."

She began to say something, then stopped. Her eyes looked bright and a trifle moist. Finishing her meal quickly, she went almost immediately into the computer-room. It was a little early for her sleep-period, but Scott hadn't bothered to stick to too rigid a schedule of watches between them.

Chapter IV

Scott passed the next watch with occasional sightings, calculations, checking of the course. The radar picked up nothing beyond a scattered drift of meteoric matter half a million miles abeam at its nearest point. The external temperature of the hull was still gradually dropping as they travelled even further from the Sun into the empty dark.

" They told me you were retiring from the Command after this run," she said during their next meal. " What will you do afterwards ?"

" Probably a freight run. Team up with another pilot, operate a small freighter between the settled planets—if the war doesn't finish everything."

" I see." Again, he had the impression she had begun to say more, changing her mind.

Closer at hand, Neptune appeared as a blurred greenish disc crossed by dark and light bands. Nereid, the smaller moon, was throwing a round jet-black shadow on the disc. Triton was away to one side, already showing irregular surface markings.

They reversed the ship with the gyros, and Scott checked over the period and intensity of the deceleration blast for the final time. To gain the maximum result from his strictly rationed fuel, he would need a shorter and even fiercer blast than at takeoff. He showed the figures to Bren.

" Looks as if it's up to you," he said.

" Can you stand it ?"

" Have to. We want some fuel left for the return."

" I can't use that acceleration. It would kill you. Only a Jupiter pilot could stand it."

" I can take it. Do it."

They strapped themselves into the control-seats. He made his final checkings. " All yours," he said.

The howl of the blast lifted to a frightening scream as the pressure built up. Blackness. The weight of many tons pressing down on him, the heavy thudding of his heart, the almost impossible task of getting air into his lungs—he was still aware of these things for a long time through the darkness. Then, sooner than he had expected, it was over.

He focussed throbbing eyes on the instruments. " Good work," he said. " That leaves enough fuel . . . to swing into orbit . . . Then land. Then off again. Refuel at Earth's orbit for landing." He was speaking in slurred, jerky phrases, with a deep gulp of air between each.

He was suddenly aware of Bren leaning over him, the hood of her coat back, her red-gold hair disordered.

" Rick ! Are you all right ?" Her face was tense.

He grinned. " Sure."

" I was afraid—" She leaned closer, her eyes exploring his face. " I was afraid I'd killed you." Their eyes met for a

moment, and she looked quickly down and began unfastening his safety-straps, pulling them free and throwing them aside with unnecessary sharpness. He caught her hand and gave it a brief, firm pressure. She answered him with a forced smile and walked away.

When they were in orbit about Triton, he broadcast the call-sign over and over. In the screen, the barren surface of the satellite unrolled under their vision-screens. More than five-thousand miles in diameter, it was more like one of the Earth-type inner planets than a satellite, but veiled with a thin methane atmosphere, with white plains of frozen ammonia and jagged mountains of ice and dark rocks of substances that might have been liquid or even gaseous under Terrestrial temperatures.

On the lighted side of the planet, a sparkling point of emerald green light flashed briefly at intervals. Scott brought it into full magnification on the screen, but all he could see was the single intermittent pin-point of green fire at the foot of a ridge of mountains that gleamed in the wan sunlight along the edge of a frozen ammonia ocean.

" What's that light ?" asked Bren.

Scott shook his head. " Don't know. Must be something Harlow's rigged up. Don't know why he didn't use a standard landing light, or where he got the gear for this."

" Could it be the Alliance people ?"

" Have to wait till we get a reply."

A response came in a few minutes. First a crackle in the receiver, then a thinly-audible voice.

" Harlow here. I hear you clearly."

Scott grabbed the mike. " Captain Scott, Strategic Command. Can you give me co-ordinates for landing ?"

" Can you see my beacon ? Land on the ammonia surface a mile westward."

" Okay. Out."

Scott took the ship round in another circuit, killing the speed and dropping towards the plain of solidified ammonia, the ship tail-downward, vertical on her gyros. The view-astern screen showed the white, barren plain rushing to meet them, with a darker line of jagged peaks swinging out of the picture to one side. He switched to automatic, letting the radar and computer take over the landing.

They dropped on a screeching blast that sent vast clouds of ammonia whirling outward and upward as they neared the ground, so that as the moment of contact came close the screen showed only a flame-lit chaos of boiling fog. Then the blast cut off, and the ship was down, tilting slightly as its fins ground unevenly into the hard-packed surface.

Scott got to his feet, stamping his feet on the floor. " We made it !" he shouted exultantly. He clapped his hand on Bren's shoulder. " Thanks."

Harlow's voice blared from the speaker, surprisingly loud and deep after the thin whisper they had heard while in orbit. " Glad you made it, Scott. I'll be out there to pick you up in my runabout in a few minutes."

" Thanks," replied Scott. " Don't hurry—the ship will be hot for a while."

" Okay. Out."

Scott spun the dials of the viewing-screen, traversing the field around the bleak horizon. Westward, the flat plain of ammonia stretched like a frozen sea to a flat skyline, beneath a dark, green-tinted sky in which the brighter stars still shone through the thin methane atmosphere. despite the fact that it was mid-day. The eastern horizon was filled with a range of eroded peaks like vicious fangs, snarling clear of the snow-like covering with spires of naked rock.

Suddenly his hands seemed to freeze on the spinning dials.

" Look ! "

Buildings. Buildings unlike any he had ever seen. Long, inward-sloping walls of what looked like green metal, broken here and there by doorways, with strange towers and domes rising above them. He followed them with the vision-screen for miles along the foot of the range. At one point a thing like a mediaeval campanile stabbed high into the air. Further along he found the flashing green light, on top of a high, tripod structure with a strange arrangement of metal rings surrounding it. The light flashed with a piercing emerald brilliance every three seconds or so—and then, while they were still looking at it, it suddenly shut off. Scott traversed the length of the buildings again, but this time nothing was moving.

Scott looked at Bren. Her face was suddenly white.

" I wonder," she said slowly, " if some earlier race on Earth found space-travel, and built these ?"

Scott shook his head. " I don't think so. Look at the design. Every detail of the architecture, the style. It looks—alien."

A slight movement on the screen brought their attention to a small shape moving straight towards them, trailing a cloud of ammonia-snow behind it. Closer, it resolved into a compact electric runabout of the type carried in space-craft, with one man aboard.

They fitted their helmets into place, checked them for air-pressure, and went out through the airlock, climbing down the metal ladder to the frozen ground. Harlow swung the four-seater runabout alongside them, and waved them aboard. They couldn't see much of him in his spacesuit, beyond realising that he was a tall lank man with a darkly tanned face.

Scott and Bren could communicate through their suit-radios, but they were unable to reach Professor Harlow in the same way. He waved towards the distant buildings, and drove off towards them almost at once.

In front of the long metal facade was a domed aluminium pressure-hut about twenty feet in diameter, with round windows like port-holes and an airlock at one side—one of the standard types of hut used by explorative expeditions. Harlow parked the runabout alongside it, and they crowded into the airlock. Within a minute, they were inside the dome, stripping off their spacesuits.

" Good to see faces again," said Harlow, as he shook hands with Scott and bowed to Bren. " And this lady's name ?"

" Miss Bren Galt," said Scott quickly. " Miss Galt is my co-pilot. She's a specialist in high-acceleration takeoff."

" Ah, of course." Professor Harlow was taller than Scott had thought, and thinner, with skin like dried leather. He might have been any age from fifty to a well-preserved seventy, with white hair and surprisingly young-looking eyes. He looked at Bren with interest. " From the Jupiter Base, I should say ? Marvellous project, that. Magnificent physique you people have." He looked out of the window towards the alien buildings. " Variations of the human physique are going to be needed. Have to change our ideas about the human norm." He made a wide gesture with his arms. " The Solar System isn't going to be our only home much longer. There's a whole galaxy waiting for us—a thousand million planetary systems."

" If anyone ever reached them," said Scott.

" They will. They *have*."

" They *have*? "

Harlow gave a dry chuckle. He waved towards the buildings. " Of course. I'm going a little fast for you. As soon as you've rested, I've something to show you."

" I'm ready whenever you like," said Scott.

" All right if I come along ?" asked Bren.

Harlow looked enquiringly at Scott, who nodded. " Of course."

They climbed back into their suits. " The sooner the better," Scott told Harlow. " The Eastern Alliance picked up your broadcast. They have a ship on the way here. Should reach here in a few days."

" Then I'll take you straight to the vital part of my discovery. A pity. I wanted to give you a full tour of these buildings. Obviously a highly advanced culture."

" Equivalent to our own ?"

" Hard to evaluate. So different. In my opinion they'd travelled much further—technologically, at least. Otherwise I can determine very little about them."

They walked across the ammonia-snow to the nearest of the buildings, where Harlow led them to what was obviously an airlock. It had sliding doors of some golden metal that fitted perfectly, sealing by mirror-smooth metal-to-metal jointing. As the inner door of the lock opened, they found themselves looking into a long gallery with sunlight filtering through green-tinted windows in its vaulted ceiling.

Harlow began removing his suit. They did likewise.

Harlow waved his hand upward. " The builders of this place used an oxygen-helium atmosphere. Still plenty of gas liquified in containers. First time I breathed it I was nearly too drunk on oxygen in five minutes to find my way out. I managed to alter the proportions coming through the valves."

He led them along the gallery. Gravity on Triton was not much more than half Earth-normal, and Scott found himself moving easily and lightly. Bren, with less than a quarter of her accustomed weight, glided about as though dancing.

They passed a high bench carrying some strange apparatus. " Before we go on," said Harlow, " I want you to look at this. It's a microscope."

Scott, standing on a box which Harlow had evidently placed in front of the desk, looked at the thing. As he did so a curious

chill crept down his spine. The device had three eyepieces, arranged in a triangle. Placed as it was, it could only have been used by someone—or something—much taller than any man. He glanced uneasily in both directions along the gloomy corridor.

Harlow laughed. "The normal reaction. We all did it. But don't worry. The whole place is deserted."

"Deserted for how long?" asked Scott.

"Who knows? Perhaps for a lifetime. Perhaps for ten-thousand years. The metals they used don't corrode in methane, and until we got the locks open no dust could filter in."

Scott walked along beside the benches. "Maybe ten-thousand years. On the other hand, these—these people could have left the day before the First Expedition arrived?"

"Theoretically—yes."

Scott again looked in each direction along the vast corridor. "Where's the electronic gear you found? I'd like to get a quick look at it and get the hell out of here."

Harlow laughed again. "I know how you feel. But fifty years of archaeological work have broken me out of that habit of thinking."

"Maybe. But there's still the Alliance ship on its way here."

"Right. I'll take you straight to my main exhibit."

Harlow led the way on, turning at right angles into another corridor that joined the first, then turning again into an intersecting hall, this time with no windows, its depth a yawning blackness. Harlow's voice echoed hollowly from far-off metal walls.

"I've rigged up lights here. One moment."

Suddenly the hall was flooded with light. Scott gave a shout of amazement.

He was looking at something that could only have been some form of aircraft or spacecraft. Yet it was unlike any other craft he had ever seen. Spindle-shaped, pointed at either end, eighty or ninety feet long, with fins at the tail and amidships, it looked like an ultra-modern sculptor's conception of a shark. Its smooth hull was built entirely of some unfamiliar green metal, giving the appearance of having been cast in one piece, its surface broken only by slitted crystalline ports and an open airlock door amidships.

He became dully aware of Harlow's voice : " Why they abandoned their ship, I don't know, although I suspect they were overhauling part of its drive mechanism. That's far beyond my knowledge of electronics, by the way. That's why I sent my message."

Scott walked down alongside the alien ship, his steps ringing on the metal floor. The airlock was large, suggesting that it had been built for something with a body much bigger than a human body.

" Come aboard," said Harlow, climbing improvised steps to the airlock.

Inside, the ship was lit by a faint, luminous glow that shone coldly from the metal surfaces of walls and ceilings. Just aft of the entrance-door, Harlow pointed out a set of polyhedral wire screens that seemed to shimmer, as though slightly unreal. Within them was enclosed a ten-foot globe of midnight blackness, blacker than any object Scott had ever imagined, as though it absorbed every particle of light which struck it.

" Those screens appear to be charged energy-shields," said Harlow. " The black globe is their main power-source. I wouldn't advise dismantling the screens to find out what's inside—see the thickness of insulation on the power outlets ? And their insulators were a better dielectric than anything we know."

Scott moved forward to the control-room.

" God !" he said when he saw it.

" What is it ?" asked Bren from behind him.

He pointed to the control-seat. " What sort of thing used *that* ? "

Harlow moved alongside him. " I've often speculated about that. Even tried to draw it. Gave it up after a few attempts. Might have been frightened to come back here."

Scott sat at the controls, looking at the shining levers and strangely marked dials of incomprehensible instruments. He was silent for a long time.

" You know," he said at last. " I'm going to try to fly this thing."

" Good Lord, man, why ?" Harlow strode across to him. " Why not photograph what you want, take the movable equipment you can get out of it, and leave it here ?"

" I can't move the power-source. And I can't move those energy-screens. If I leave them here, the Alliance people will find the thing, and maybe *they'll* find some way of getting it

to fly." He sighed. "I don't like the job, but it's the only way. I'm going to fly this thing back to Earth."

"Alone?"

"Yes. Miss Galt can get you back in the J4."

"You've got to get this thing going, first," said Bren. "It mightn't be usable. Why was it left here?"

"That's the first thing I'm going to find out."

Chapter V

Scott spent hour after hour tracing the control circuits of the ship. The fine, thinly-insulated wires connecting the various instruments were differently coloured. Some of the combinations of shades were very hard to distinguish, as they must have been intended for recognition by eyes with a different colour-sense than human eyes. But the colours, once isolated, proved a reliable guide, and he was able to label the dials on the panels to indicate which of them referred to each function of the ship.

Parts from the ship's mechanism were lying on benches along the side of the hall. Some of these he replaced, with the help of Harlow and Bren, fitting them in like elements of a puzzle.

As far as they could make out, the ship had operated by some form of anti-gravity principle. There were screens in the ceiling and floor of the cabin, and vertical screens fore and aft of it. Scott found that a certain switch allowed current to feed from the power-source to a form of electric motor driving a thing rather like an alternator, but evidently different in purpose. When he threw the switch in, the motor hummed, and the machine linked to it set a ring of violet sparks fluttering about a commutator visible through its transparent housing. Scott turned a dial on the control-panel connected with the machine and with the screens. He felt unaccountably heavier.

Thinking the ship was moving vertically, he hastily reversed the dial. He felt lighter. As he turned the dial further to the left he had the sensation of weightlessness, as though he were in free fall. He centralised the dial, bringing his weight back to normal.

The screens must constitute some form of gravity-shield—or they produced a force similar in nature to a gravity-field.

The sweat stood out on his forehead. It was no longer a case of *trying* to fly the alien ship back to Earth. *He had to fly it back* !

He had stumbled on something bigger than he had thought. Something that opened up vast horizons. The conquest of deep space . . .

He showed the discovery to Harlow and to Bren. They worked on in tense haste until Harlow suggested they break off for some rest.

" This thing's too important—I'm keeping right on," said Scott. " You two go back to the dome."

" Right," said Harlow tiredly. " Coming ?" he asked Bren.

" I'm staying with Rick," she said.

Harlow went back along the corridor out of sight. Scott continued with his tedious elimination of circuit after circuit, gradually retrieving part by part of the equipment scattered on the benches outside, and fitting it into position. Most of the parts were held in place by strangely-shaped bolts which evidently should have had some kind of power-tool to tighten them, and Scott had to improvise a wrench to fit. When he had pulled them home as hard as he thought humanly possible, Bren invariably managed to tighten them a shade further.

Then Scott made the discovery that their entire effort was going to end in failure. One of the generators feeding power to the main lifting screens was inoperable. The central shaft of the thing refused to turn in its bearings. Carefully he dismantled the housing, and they found one of the bearings a half-fused mass of broken metal.

" What now ?" asked Bren, sitting back on her heels.

" This is the finish. This is what immobilised the ship—what they weren't able to repair."

" No way you can fix it ?"

" If I had a lathe, I could turn down one of the bearings from the J4's gyro-motors. But without machines—" He spread his hands wide.

They sat in silence for a time. Suddenly Harlow's voice came through the radio. " Captain Scott. I'm picking up a blip on the radar. Something out in space. In an orbit around Triton."

" That's all it needs," said Scott bitterly. " That'll be the Alliance ship."

" I've shut off any light that might show—it's night outside here, you know. But they'll find us as soon as the daylight shows your ship."

" Okay," said Scott. " We'll come out to the dome."

Back in the dome, Scott told Harlow about the generator. " If I could get that ship back to Earth," he said, " we could win any war that would be likely to develop."

" I wonder," said Harlow thoughtfully.

" No doubt in my mind," replied Scott.

" Captain Scott, as an archaeologist, I might consider myself something of an expert in history. History in the long term. The history of the rise and fall of civilisations."

Scott nodded wearily.

" I don't think any single weapon would be the answer today. Each faction on Earth has sufficient fusion bombs to obliterate not only its rival, but the whole of life on the surface of the planet."

Scott looked at him sombrely without comment.

" What would happen if either side were forced into a position where military defeat was obvious ?"

Scott was reluctant to speak.

" What would happen ?" persisted Harlow.

" They'd try for a quick knockout."

" Exactly. Whichever way the initial advantage might lie. And what would be the end result of a knockout blow with modern weapons ?"

Scott stared blankly before him. " It would be bad. Only a handful surviving on each side. Probably living underground."

" The *end* result ?" pursued Harlow.

" Well, they'd come out and start over, after a time."

" With the fall-out coming down twenty, fifty years later ?"

" Well, they'd have to come out eventually."

" For what ?"

" For food."

" What food ?"

Scott's eyes were fixed on Harlow as if he were looking through him. Very slowly, Harlow nodded.

" You see ?" he said. " There could be only one end result. Absolute extinction of life throughout the planet. Not for a year. Not for a generation. For ever, man ! For ever !"

Early on the next day, they watched from the airlock of the alien building as the Eastern Alliance ship landed, dropping on its howling rocket blast within half a mile of the J4, further across the plain. It was painted half white and half international orange—a larger ship than the J4, though apparently less powerful.

" Must be one of their survey ships," said Scott. " Funny, I hadn't thought of that. That explains why it didn't have the speed of one of their cruisers—they must have sent the ship that happened to be nearest, regardless of type or purpose"

" Wait here," said Harlow. " Inside the buildings. I'll meet them alone."

" They know we're here. They've seen the J4."

" I'll keep in touch with you by radio," said Harlow, and then he was off towards the dome.

Through Harlow's binoculars, Scott saw three figures climb down the slender ladder of the white and orange ship. They waited there while Harlow drove across to meet them in the runabout. When he reached them, Scott could see nothing but a close group of figures alongside the machine. Then Harlow drove back, with two of the Alliance men aboard, one of them remaining at the foot of the ladder.

" Anybody's guess what's going on there," he told Bren. He turned his glasses on the solitary figure near the Alliance ship. The man was moving about. As he turned, the sun flashed on bright metal.

" The fellow on guard's carrying a gun. Probably all are."

" What are you going to do ?"

" I—" Suddenly Scott drove his fist into his palm. " Got it !" He seized her by the arm. " Quick ! Back to the alien ship."

" Why ?"

" You'll see. Can you run ?"

He raced down the long corridor. To his surprise, Bren kept up with him easily in the light Triton gravity. In fact, she was ahead of him part of the way, the quick thrusts of her legs sending her forward in giant strides.

Inside the alien ship, Scott flicked the switch that activated the generator of the ceiling and floor screens. "Did you say you can take 16-G ?" he asked.

" Yes. Maybe more."

" How much can you take in a standing position ?"

" I don't know. At home I go about under 2½-G all the time. Maybe I could take five or six."

" Good. That's more than I can stand up to, or any of the fellows from the Alliance ship. If they look for this ship, we'll let them find it. We'll let them come right in here, guns and all. Then we'll hit them with 5-G. Think you can take it from there ?"

Her face was pale. " Better try me out," she said.

Scott sat in the seat, leaning back to give his neck and spine plenty of support. Bren stood in the middle of the floor. He slowly turned the dial of the gravity-field of the cabin.

The pressure forced him down hard in the seat. The girl took a couple of short, very quick steps as she braced herself. She seemed to lose an inch or so in stature.

" All right ?" he asked anxiously.

" Of course," she said a little irritably. " That's not up to Jupiter normal."

He turned the dial steadily further. She smiled, impatiently.

" Here. Let me do that." She walked across the metal floor, her body rigidly erect, moving with incredible speed. Her strides were short, but very swift, her legs blurred with their quickness of movement, her erect body giving the impression of gliding across the room as though propelled by a violent thrust from behind. Scott had the illusion of watching a film run through a projector at perhaps three times its normal speed.

He tried to lift his arm, but it was like lead. She lifted her hand without apparent exertion and turned the dial further, much further to the right. The light took on a reddish tinge that told Scott he was not far from blackout.

" All right ?" he asked.

" Course-I'm-all-right !" The words were run together like a single word.

" Can you lift your arm ?"

She clenched her hand and lifted it to shoulder level, her arm bent, biceps swelling. Suddenly she shot it vertically above her head, then lowered it again.

He looked at the dial, but couldn't lift his hand to it. The rapid beat of hard footsteps rattled across the cabin, and she reached past him, still keeping her body tensely erect, turning the dial slightly to the right, then all the way back to the left. The pressure came off. She seemed to gain a couple of inches in height. Scott took a deep breath.

Scott went outside the ship and returned with a sheet of thin metal panelling which he had removed from one of the bulkheads to get at the wiring. He stood it up so that it hid the control-seat from the entrance to the cabin, jamming it in place with metal rods which he had found outside.

"Now," he said. "When I bring them into the control-room, you'll be here. Generator running—if they hear the motor I'll give some explanation. When I call your name, turn the dial to this mark—the figure that looks like a reversed K with a bend in it."

"What happens if you're in the field?"

"It'll flatten the lot of us, except you. It won't hurt me—I'll be ready for it."

"What then?"

"Any sign of fight in them, you reverse the field, then put the pressure on again. Twice, three times."

"I see. Hope it works."

"It's got to work." Scott looked at his watch. "I'll leave you here. Might be a long time—but don't go away."

"I'll be here. Might practise a bit of walking under heavy gravity while you're gone."

"Okay. But be careful."

"*You* be careful."

As Scott approached the dome he felt a sense of mounting tension. He approached cautiously. Through one of the ports he could see the head and shoulders of Harlow, who was standing with a glass of some drink in his hand, relaxed, talking. As Scott watched, Harlow evidently reached the climax of what he was saying, and burst into laughter.

Scott edged round to see who else was in the room. There were two men in grey spacesuits, helmets off, one a giant of a man with a heavy brown beard, the other much younger, lean and cold-looking, the tightness about his eyes and mouth somehow wolfish. The big man was seated at the table, a filled glass before him and a bottle near at hand. The younger man stood near the door of the airlock, leaning against the wall, a deadly-looking solenoid rifle by his side.

Scott was unable to hear what was being said, but Harlow and the bearded man seemed to be on the best of terms. Nothing could be gained by standing outside—the man guarding the ship had no doubt seen him emerge from the alien building, and would communicate with the others if he

acted suspiciously. He pressed the button alongside the air-lock.

When he stepped through the inner door, the younger of the two men in grey was standing just inside, the solenoid rifle in his hands.

" Ah, Captain Scott," said Harlow. " I'd like you to meet Professor Sanin. We've known each other on and off for years. When we were working on the ruins north of the Lacus Solis we pooled our equipment and our discoveries all the time."

The bearded man extended his hand to Scott. " Pleasure to meet any fren' of Professor Harlow," he rumbled in a deep bass. He waved his hand to include the younger man. " My pilot, Lieutenant Keljuk."

Keljuk nodded stiffly to Scott, still holding his rifle.

" It seems," said Sanin ponderously, " my government has given me a task I don' like." He shrugged his shoulders. " I am geologist, geophysicist, vulcanologist. Not a soldier." He turned to look at his pilot. " Not like Keljuk, here. He's a fine boy, but he can't forget he's not still in the army."

" Just what is your task, Professor Sanin ?" asked Scott evenly.

" You must know that. But look—we are scientific expeditions, yes ? Professor Harlow and I, we know each other long time. Best we put all the cards on the table, yes ?"

Scott nodded. " Nothing we could hide for long in a place like this."

" So. We are exploring surface of one of outer asteroids—Hidalgo, way out beyond Jupiter orbit. We get your message, we relay it. Our people decode, order us here. Discovery of military importance. Other ships coming—cruisers—but we are nearest. We are to find what this discovery is."

" We've just been talking about the war threat," broke in Harlow. " Professor Sanin is inclined to agree with me—a war with modern weapons could mean the extinction of life on Earth."

" So," agreed Sanin. " Trouble is, Keljuk here is still a soldier—eh, Mitka ?" He looked at his companion.

" This is a national emergency," Keljuk replied coldly.

Scott came to a sudden decision. " I wouldn't say it's of great military importance," he said. " But I'll show it to you if you wish. Tell me, though, would you do something for me in return ?"

The three of them looked at him in silence.

" I've damaged a generator bearing on my ship." He nodded towards the J4, visible through one of the windows. " Have you a maintenance shop aboard your ship ? I want the use of a lathe to turn down a new bearing."

" Sure," said Sanin. " We could fix that. Federation machinery not so good sometimes, eh ?" He laughed gustily.

" Sometimes," agreed Scott ruefully.

" Now," said Keljuk. " Could we see what you've found?"

Chapter VI

Scott led the three of them back through the long corridors of the alien buildings. Sanin wanted to stop and look at everything he passed. He talked volubly with Harlow the whole way. Keljuk stalked along in silence beside Scott, his rifle at the ready.

When they came in sight of the alien ship, they were as stunned as Scott had been.

" But," burst our Keljuk, " how could a planet like Triton produce a culture like this ?"

" It didn't," pointed out Sanin. " These people came from some-place else."

Suddenly Scott stepped in front of the other three.

" Listen !" he said tensely. " Listen to me a minute."

They watched him in silence. He walked up and down a few paces, then stood facing them.

" What would happen if a ship like this were to appear suddenly in the Earth's atmosphere ?"

" If it were over Washington, New York, Rio, everyone say it's an Alliance ship. If over an Alliance city, everyone say it's a Federation ship." Sanin gestured with both hands.

" But if it appeared over cities in both groups of countries ? About the same time ?"

Silence for a moment. This time it was Harlow who spoke first. " They'd have to agree it was an alien ship."

" Exactly," said Scott. " And to reinforce the idea, suppose it broadcast some kind of ultimatum—we'd have to work that out—telling the population of the Earth to prepare for contact by some force from beyond the Solar System—some force vastly more powerful than either the Alliance *or* the Federation. What then ?"

"It would never work," said Keljuk. "They'd realise it was a trick. They'd recognise human voices."

"We could manage it in several languages, between us," interposed Harlow.

"They'd still recognise voices," persisted Keljuk.

"Wait a minute," Scott held up his hand. "Suppose we taped the voices, and modified the sound?"

"Still recognisable," Keljuk gestured with his rifle. "Let's go aboard."

Scott led the way into the control cabin, with Keljuk behind him. Keljuk's narrowed eyes took in the dismantled housing of the generator as they passed it. "So that's why you wanted the use of our lathe. Will this thing fly if that's fixed?"

"Maybe," said Scott.

Keljuk moved quickly to one side of the cabin, spinning to face the other three.

"One moment," he said. The rifle rested menacingly across his arm. "I don't think this plan of Captain Scott's will work. And if it doesn't, the ship could as easily fall into Federation hands as into ours."

"Don' be dramatic, Mitka," rumbled Sanin. "I think it's worth considering. May work. May not. If it does, we've stopped a war that we agree will finish both our countries. Probably finish human life. If it don' work—" He spread his arms wide. "At least, we tried to do something bigger than anyone has tried before."

Keljuk lifted his rifle slightly. "I'm sorry, Professor. I regard this as a national emergency. I'm taking command."

"Bren!" Scott shouted. "*Now*!"

The gravity-field hit them with an almost stunning violence. Scott's knees buckled under him, and he found himself on his haunches, hands braced against the floor. Keljuk had dropped in the same way, but his rifle was still across his knees. Lips bared, he made a tremendous effort to swing it round. The barrel moved slowly, as Scott tried to edge towards him.

Suddenly the force came off. More prepared, Scott sprang at Keljuk and grappled with him. The force came on again, and the two of them fell—Bren had timed it so that Scott was uppermost. Keljuk gave a sharp cry. When the pressure came off again, Scott rose with the rifle. He was the only one standing among the four of them.

Bren moved out from behind the screen, white-faced. "All right ?" she asked.

Keljuk rolled over, wincing, holding his right forearm. Their combined weight in the fall, multiplied by a factor of three or four, had apparently broken it. His face looked yellowish, waxen.

Harlow and Sanin lay still, half conscious. Scott handed the rifle to Bren, helped Harlow to his feet, then Sanin.

" Sorry," he said. " Matter of emergency."

The bearing was turned down in the Alliance craft's compact little machine-shop without difficulty, and fitted into the alien craft. Scott rolled back the sliding roof of the hall in which it was placed, and experimented carefully with the anti-gravity drive. He would have liked to have taken more time to become familiar with the controls, but time was beyond price.

He transferred the J4's radio equipment into the alien ship, and modified a transformer to enable it to draw power from the ship's sources. Harlow and Sanin recorded their voices on tapes in four different languages, giving a carefully-prepared message stating that these were the words of the xerti—a name of Harlow's devising—and that they wished to contact the population of the Earth with a view to incorporating it into their own Galactic organisation.

" No," said Scott as he listened to the tapes in the dome. " They'd recognise that."

" Why don't you do it properly, if you must go ahead with this madness." The interruption came from Keljuk, who was lying on Harlow's bunk at the side of the dome ; Sanin had set the break in his arm, and there was nowhere else to leave him until he had recuperated.

" Any suggestions ?" asked Scott icily.

" Yes. We have film aboard our ship. Ever heard of a painted sound-track ?"

The others looked at Keljuk in astonishment. Since he had been overpowered in the struggle, he had said nothing beyond an occasional monosyllable.

" You want a non-human voice, right ? Talk your message on to a sound-track. Then paint another sound-track to duplicate it fairly closely, not exactly."

" It would sound artificial," protested Harlow.

" That's what you want, isn't it ? What would an alien race do, if it had learned our languages and wanted to repro-

duce a human voice? It would use some mechanical device, wouldn't it?"

They exchanged glances.

"He's right," said Scott. Suddenly he went across to Keljuk, and held out his hand near Keljuk's free one. "Guess I misjudged you. Thanks."

Keljuk ignored his hand. "I'm not thinking of you. I'm thinking of my own people. There's just a chance that your idea might work, crazy as it is. If you must do it, it had better succeed."

•

Scott packed a large supply of food concentrates in the alien ship. He wasn't certain when he could land again, and Harlow had stocks left by the second expedition which he would no longer need. The alien ship handled well, when he became somewhat used to the controls. He had to shift the control-seat forward eighteen inches to bring himself within comfortable reach of the levers and switches and the complex system of dials.

He would have to work out his own system of navigation. Among the instruments was a transparent globe containing a free-floating inner globe, half white and half black, pierced by a hole along its axis. Wherever the ship was placed, the white half pointed to a fixed location in space, somewhere in the constellation of Sagittarius.

At last, he had everything ready to leave. He climbed into his spacesuit, shook hands with Harlow and Sanin, and looked round for Bren.

He called her. He heard her voice from the distance, and a minute later she came into the corridor in her space-suit, helmet under her arm.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

"But this might be dangerous."

"It's not safe alone. You must sleep some of the time. You need another person aboard, and I'm the obvious choice."

Scott hesitated, then grinned. "Get aboard," he said.

The gravity screens fore and aft of the cabin were geared to compensate for any inertia effects, completely nullifying the shock of acceleration. As soon as Harlow had rolled back the roof of the hall, Scott put the ship into a vertical climb. Within, there was no sensation of movement whatever—only

the dropping away of the frigid landscape of Triton in the superb vision-screens.

He headed towards the distant Sun. The speed of the ship was almost incredible—without using anything approaching full power, and without any sense of acceleration, he shot away from the satellite with such velocity that in the rear screens it looked like a lighted pebble dropping into a dark well. The larger greenish ball of Neptune dropped with it, the two dwindling into a single remote star in an unbelievably short space of time.

The ship had something resembling radar—Scott hadn't found out how it worked, but he could see that its screens picked up solid objects. It's range he didn't know, as it was graduated in units strange to him, but he decided to check it by known distances as soon as the chance presented itself.

A few brief watches brought them within the orbit of the Moon, swinging round the Earth. Full out, the ship would undoubtedly have been capable of speeds approaching that of light, or perhaps exceeding it—the fact that its makers had come from somewhere beyond the Solar System seemed to suggest that.

The vertical gravitational control made atmospheric manoeuvring easy. And some form of repulsion-screen, veiling the outside of the ship with what might have been free electronic matter held in a field, made tremendous speeds possible through air.

Scott began his broadcasts, using the power-source of the ship to slam his message across all the frequently-used wave-bands on terrestrial radio-stations. He listened to the weird, metallic voices of the painted sound-tracks with a smile, imagining the effect below him.

He made low runs over a dozen of the Earth's largest cities, showing the alien ship briefly to hundreds of thousands of people. Between appearances, he climbed high and used the ship's meteoric speed to take him half-way round the globe, choosing his dives into the lower atmosphere at random.

Out in space again, he listened to the confused reports on a hundred radio-stations throughout the world. Emergency news broadcasts breaking into every programme. The results were better than he had imagined. It was universally assumed

that not one, but many ships had been responsible for the sudden appearances, the broadcasts from above the atmosphere.

He repeated the process, showing the ship in twenty, thirty, fifty centres of population, always appearing, hovering for seconds only, then leaping away into the upper blue. Twelve hours later, when the other half of the planet was in sunshine, he repeated his appearances again in the other hemisphere.

He retired well out in orbit to listen again to the results, grinning at Bren as he spun the dial of the radio.

" Latest on the Invasion from Space !" The announcer's voice over the Federation network was high, tense. " No further sightings have been reported in the last hour of the mysterious armada of green spacecraft which have appeared at various points in the Earth's atmosphere many hundreds of times since midday yesterday. Reports of earlier sightings are still coming in to the Central Emergency Committee set up in Washington to correlate data.

" Little is known of the green ships beyond the fact that they are spindle-shaped and in a few cases apparently saucer-shaped, varying in estimated size from fifty to five-hundred feet in length. Reports of simultaneous appearances over the Eastern Alliance countries has effectively disproved the early theory that the ships might have been of terrestrial origin.

" The total number of reports has already run into many thousands. Some, which gave accounts of strange men landing in various places, and gigantic men with antennae, or sometimes in grotesque armour, have been discounted as fictitious. So far, no report of an actual landing has been authenticated.

" However, it is generally agreed by experts that the craft are of non-human origin. In many cases, they have been seen to manoeuvre with a violence that the human body could not possibly withstand.

" Professor Channing, noted authority on space medicine, stated that this manoeuvrability might mean either of two things—that the ships were flown by beings of very different physical structure from ourselves, or that they are operated by fantastically efficient systems of remote control . . .

" Suggestion for Pooling of Knowledge !

" It has been rumoured in the highest governmental circles that a suggestion is being drafted for a pooling of knowledge

on space-warfare techniques by the Federation and the Eastern Alliance. If humanity is threatened by invasion by an unknown enemy from beyond the known planets, it might well be necessary to share every scrap of knowledge turned up by research in all countries for the survival of the race as a whole."

Scott looked at Bren. " Better than we ever dreamed," he said.

" What now ?"

" Back to Triton. We can leave this ship orbiting out beyond Neptune, where only we can find it again. Shouldn't be too hard for one of us to transfer to the J4 in space—the other will have to match orbits in the J4, but we make a good team." He grinned. " We'll leave this ship in an orbit at a steep angle to the ecliptic, then fly home in the J4 and put in our report on the buildings—not on the ship."

Bren walked across to one of the ports, and stood looking out at the star-dusted immensity of the Sagittarius clouds, where the black and white compass sphere always pointed.

" I wonder if *they* are still flying space, somewhere out there," she said, half to herself.

" Time is long," said Scott. " My guess is that they haven't been this way for thousands of years."

" I suppose you're right." She stood motionless, still looking out. " I've liked working with you, Rick."

He went across to her, lifted her bodily and placed her so that she was standing on a step near the control-seat. When she turned their faces were almost on a level. He put his arms round her, holding her against him. " Like to go on working with me ?" he asked.

She nodded her head.

" Like to make your home on a freighter ?"

She nodded again.

" Then we've a lot to talk about. But first—" He leaned forward and pressed his lips hard against hers. Her body stiffened, then relaxed, then became fiercely alive, her arm tightening about him . . .

They made part of the run out to Triton at a tenth of the speed of light. In an incredibly short space of time, they were swinging in orbit above its barren surface again.

" They haven't got the beacon flashing," said Bren, looking at the screen.

" Don't expect us back yet. I'll give them the call-sign."

But the radio brought no response. They went on circling over the ammonia plains and jagged mountains.

" Wasn't that the landing place ?" asked Bren.

" I thought so. But I don't see the ships. It can't be."

But it was. Scott was forced to admit it to himself after making another circuit. He brought the ship carefully down, close to Harlow's aluminium dome. The airlock of the dome stood open—both doors of it.

" I don't like it," said Scott, traversing the horizon with the screens. He climbed hastily into his spacesuit, Bren doing likewise.

" Better wait here," he said. " I'll take a look around."

" Please, Rick. I'm coming with you."

" Okay. But stick close to me."

They walked across to the dome. At the door, Scott halted sharply. The place was empty—stripped of everything movable.

They walked into the alien buildings, their steps echoing eerily along the empty vastness of the corridors. As they passed the benches where the triple microscope and other devices had stood, Scott noticed that they, too, had been stripped clean.

" Do you suppose the Alliance cruiser got here, after all ?" asked Bren.

" Can't understand it. They'd have needed a fleet to move all this gear. And it would have taken them days. Weeks."

She moved close alongside him. " Rick."

" What is it ?"

" Let's get out of here."

" In a minute. I'm checking for any sign they may have left."

" Let's get out now. I'm frightened."

" But there's no-one here now."

Her voice rose suddenly higher. " You know as well as I do that was no Alliance cruiser that came here. Let's go. Quickly."

He looked searchingly round. " Okay," he said.

They retraced their steps. As they reached the outer door, Bren suddenly screamed. Scott jumped. He had never imagined her screaming.

" Look !" She pointed at the ammonia snow at their feet. Their footprints were visible all the way from the dome, in

the slanting sunlight. Beside them were the older prints of Harlow, Sanin, Keljuk and themselves, made when they had last been here. And then he saw the other prints.

They ran across the older marks at many points. Footprints that had been put there since they had left for Earth. Deep marks that were not the footprints of human beings, but of—other things. Shod prints, but of strange shape. Longer than a man's, but divided into three widely-splayed toes.

His blood like ice, he followed them fifty yards across the frozen surface, trying to match their seven-foot strides. Then they ended. Beyond were two long, straight depressions crushed into the surface, like the skid-marks of a colossal ship.

Neither spoke until they were back in the control-cabin. Then Scott looked up through the ports at the unwinking billions of stars.

" God !" he said. " I tried to stop a war. *But what now* ?"

—Wynne Whiteford

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GALACTIC GALAPAGOS

by

NELSON SHERWOOD



It was a paradise world—
yet the Colonists faced
extinction unless someone
found a solution to
their problem !

Illustrated by LEWIS

Better known for his adventure and detective stories, Nelson Sherwood has long been a follower of science fiction and now combines business with pleasure in his first story to our pages. Much of his time is spent in travelling and the following story was devised while 'loafing through the Caribbean.'

GALACTIC GALAPAGOS

by NELSON SHERWOOD

Chapter I

She wore a bright red ribbon in her hair, which was golden and curled and hung in pretty ringlets over her print dress of white and blue. She had mischievous, sea-blue eyes. Her feet and legs were bare and brown. She carried a doll, a scrap of plastic and nylon. It was her birthday. She was nine.

Running across the alien grass, laughing, she could have had no other warning than that of a sudden chill as the cross-shaped shadow fell upon her.

The hoarse and jagged caws of triumph spitting from the purple eagle mingled with the girl's frenzied, hysterical screaming. The eagle rose slowly on bending pinions and his purple plummage shone in the sun like burnished armour.

A man appeared in the doorway of the log and plastic cabin. The white blob of a woman's face showed over his shoulder. The express rifle in his hands lifted, took aim, quivered as though shaken by a great storm—and dropped. He could not—it was obvious—nerve himself to fire upon the bird carrying off his daughter in its cruel curved talons.

The eagle's raucous cawing, the woman's screaming, the girl's hysterical shrieking, the man's horrible breathless gasping —all were pierced by the shot. The echo slapped back like a titanic asdic ping.

The eagle faltered. It lost flying speed as it automatically discarded weight by dropping the body burdening it down ; it stalled. The bullet had found some vital spot ; blood stained the glorious purple plumage. The bird fell. It followed the girl. They struck the ground within three feet of each other.

Standing on the brow of the hill that sloped down to the cabin and hearing in his mind still that heart-rending screaming Stopford slowly lowered his rifle. He could feel the repugnance hammering in his blood. The purple eagle was a magnificent creature, proud, lonely, regal—and yet its recent depredations were becoming so serious that it could now only be regarded as a killer, to be stamped out by every means at the colonists' disposal.

Stopford shouldered his rifle and walked slowly towards the huddled group. The man and his wife were bent over their child. The woman was crooning to herself, a primal sound that had but one meaning. That sound hurt Stopford physically. It had more power to move him than had the bedlam of sound before he had fired. He had come to this paradise planet, called in all hope Belvedere, to find himself again after his wartime experiences, to try to recapture some of the joyous spirit of youth—and he could not shut his eyes to the decay, the change, the accelerating slide to chaos that was taking place about him. He felt betrayed.

He did not touch the body of the bird. That would be alive with vermin. The creeping crawling mites swarmed everywhere on the island now, growing worse every day, forcing the colonists to resort to the most primitive methods of control.

" Is she all right ?" he asked.

" I couldn't . . . " the man was saying. " Jennie ! Jennie ! Oh, God—she's still alive."

The woman was still in a state of partial shock. Stopford caught the man's shoulder.

" Blythe ! Get yourself together, man ! We've got to take Jennie to the doc right away. If she's still alive then there's still hope."

" Yes. Yes—you're right. I couldn't do anything ! Don't you understand ? I couldn't—do—it . . . "

The task of soothing Mrs. Blythe, of organising the helicopter to take the stricken family into the town, of informing the town marshal that another purple eagle had been destroyed —the ten pounds bounty was ludicrous—consumed all Stopford's energies. As a member of the colony on Macquarie island on Belvedere, an island the size of Australia, he had been caught and bound up with their hopes and fears, their plans and visions of the future. His desire to seek a place of refuge where he could relax and recuperate after the war could not have—in his own estimation of himself as a man—any validity in face of the common danger.

Standing as an observer, off to one side, he was more keenly aware of the colonists' problems because he could see them all, in the round. These people's lives were threatened. Their crops were systematically destroyed by marauding bands of omnivorous quadrupeds from the forests, their flocks ravaged by the purple eagles and their everyday life made a misery by the incessant attacks of billions of bugs and crawling insects and biting lice. Belvedere as a name for this planet and this island was a sour joke.

The helicopter slanted up and away. Beneath them Macquarie Island unreeled its lush vegetation, its sparkling springs of pure water, its rich red land. Macquarie could have been the sort of place any man would seek where he could settle down, build a home, raise kids and tinker with whatever hobby he had chosen to fill his leisure hours.

After the war plenty of men had had that dream.

They had reached out from Earth and the planets under her surveillance, rushing between the stars in their silvery ships, settling like clouds of migrating birds upon the planets given up by the enemy—one could not say the beaten enemy —in exchanges that were designed to straighten out the interstellar mess. The war between Earth and the twin systems of Barjolm had not lasted for any engtth of time as interstellar conflicts were measured. At the peace treaty it had been agreed that certain planets should change hands, certain spheres

of interest in this segment of the Galaxy should interlock, so that any possibility of future misunderstandings might be eliminated before they had chance to mature.

So Earth had accepted the watery world of Belvedere from Barjolm, her administrators had moved in and supervised the withdrawal of the Barjolmians, and the Terran settlers had swarmed down in their flashing ships.

Captain Stopford, TSN, Retd., with a war wound troubling his leg, had chosen the planet of Belvedere and the island of Macquarie from the hat. It had made no difference to him where he settled and he had been attracted by the stories of the beneficent climate, the lush soil and general air of luxury that were rife about Belvedere. Macquarie had, for a short time, seemed heaven.

So gradually that the fact was hard and firm long before anyone had any inkling that it existed Macquarie had changed its character. Unlike the other islands—Governor's, Ffoulkes, Hezelbach—Macquarie had become a hell island.

Looking down now from the helicopter, with the moans and sobs of the injured child and her mother sounding in the cabin, Stopford thought for a moment of cutting out and leaving. The thought lasted a mere fraction of a second. He had chosen Macquarie ; he intended to stay, to see it through with the colonists. He had his reasons.

She worked at the town's one hotel.

There was no chance for him, of course ; but just thinking about it made him feel better. He had decided that the role of indulgent foster-parent should suit him best.

Then he thought of young Jennie Blythe and the purple eagle and he began to wonder just how the colonists were going to pull out of their present difficulties. They were a hard and tough crowd of men ; they would not tolerate half-measures.

Blythe, short and stocky, a man of about forty with the leathern face and hands of a farmer, called an emergency meeting as soon as they hit town. He was bitter. Doctor Fraser could hold out only a fifty fifty chance for Jennie.

" Get the folks together," he told the marshal, Crampton, his manner tense and over-controlled, reminding Stopford of an elastic band stretched just to the point before breaking. Crampton sensed that explosive force as well. Quite apart from the marshal's own feelings—he ran a small spread down the valley and had lost a fine ewe the week before—there was

in him the same pent-up force that rode all the colonists. Things—and by that they meant the bug problem as much as the attacks by carnivores on their flocks, and herbivores and omnivores on their crops—were getting out of hand. To Stopford the explosion point seemed to be just round the corner. He wondered what the people would do about it.

He soon found out.

" They don't have this trouble over on Governor's Island," said Larry, the tractor repairman. " Yes, and not on Ffoulkes and Marchetti and Henzlebach. Seems every damned island on Belvedere except ours is okay."

" We can ask them for help," the doc said, rubbing his long nose, " but short of complete extermination what can we do?"

" What else is necessary ?" The voices were ugly.

Remembering the revulsion that had filled him when his rifle sights had centred on the glorious purple plumage of the eagle, Stopford felt sick. These people were planning to exterminate a wonderful creature. To blot out a masterwork of grace and rhythm and colour and strength—that was the trouble ; the strength was too great.

" Have you thought what that would mean ?" he said, diffidently. He always trod warily when discussing policy with these colonists ; they still regarded him half askance as not yet being fully one of themselves. " What resources you would need, I mean, for a full scale effort ?"

Crampton, the marshal, fidgeting nervously with his tin star—an understandable anachronism, that—said : " I think I know what's bothering you, Stopford. You're always saying how beautiful those filthy eagles are."

Blythe cut in, half-heartedly : " Hell, marshal, he did kill that one taking Jennie."

" He'd never have been able to show his face around here if he hadn't."

" What are we waiting for ?" demanded Larry. He was wearing a patched pair of denims, and grease from tractor engines smeared his face and arms. " Who's going across to Governor's and tell them what we want ?"

Details were soon settled. Stopford could not find it logical to condemn these people. They were human. They were trying to settle a new planet, a world just taken over from Barjolm, trying to forget the years of war and terror and misery, trying tirelessly to fashion a new life for themselves

and their children. There was about them a suppressed despair, a quiet bitterness, that was all the more rending by its very acceptance of defeat. They were clutching at straws, now, and they knew it.

Perhaps the only thing they could do would be to abandon their homes on Macquarie Island. They might scratch a small living squeezed in on one of the other crowded islands. Certainly, having invested everything in these farms and shops, they couldn't afford to space out to another frontier planet. Transportation, in most instances, came high.

Belvedere was a paradise planet, it seemed, for every island of its rolling seas. All were much of a size, there were no large continents, and the ill-luck that had led these people and Stopford to choose Macquarie was just something that could not be explained short of blind fate.

Stopford watched the crowd break up. Farmers walked jerkily to their helicopters and ground cars ; they had the air of men girding on their weapons for a last ditch defence. Well, it was, wasn't it ? Stopford went across to his hotel and looked in at the bar.

Chapter II

Sally smiled at him. " Hullo, Stop. Your usual ?"

" Thanks. Those people. I feel sorry for them."

Sally was small and lithe with brown hair and brown eyes. She wore tight pants. She could throw a ten stone man a clear five yards over her shoulder. Stopford's soft drink appeared on the counter like magic between her brown, competent hands.

" I wish they'd do something about these bugs," she said.

" Yes, they seem to be worse every day," answered Stopford, drinking thirstily.

Sally cocked her head at him. " That was a good shot. I mean—poor Blythe was too scared to fire for fear of hitting Jennie."

" The eagle would have taken her to his nest. Either way she was dead. I was lucky she didn't die when she struck."

" Lucky, Stopford ?" Larry had walked in. He had cleaned himself up, and the way he asked for a whisky told Stopford what Larry thought about Sally. Somehow, that troubled him. There could be no hope in his own case, he knew that.

Here he was, thirty-seven, a Naval veteran, badly wounded at the battle of Kaminski's Star, eking out his pension and trying to recuperate on what was called a paradise planet. Sally would want a young, go-ahead fellow—a tractor repairman, for instance.

"Lucky, Larry? Why, yes. I don't figure I'm a crack shot."

"I thought all you space-navy types were supermen?"

Stopford laughed that off. If Larry thought he could ride him, he would be mistaken. It was quite plain that Larry was jealous. Stopford thought that that was because Larry had not been in the space navy, did not have a cluster of tin medals—nor a wound that still smarted in the small hours. He could not think it was because of Sally.

"What do you plan to ask the Governor for, Larry?" he asked, changing the prickly subject.

Larry laughed. "Guns. Poison. Flamethrowers. We'll go through the whole island, east to west, and smoke out everything that has teeth or claws."

Sally laughed too, a little nervously, and began to polish a glass. It shone brightly against her dusky skin. Larry watched it. He licked his lips. "Yes, sir," he said in a quiet voice. "We'll wipe out every filthy one of them."

"Let's hope you get rid of the bugs, too," said Sally.

"At least," offered Stopford, "we don't have any flying insects to bother us, no flies or midges or wasps." He turned as the doc walked in, wiping his forehead.

"Whisky, Sally," the doc said, blowing. "I've seen Jenny Blythe. I know you're all interested. I think she'll pull round, now. But it will be touch and go."

"I'm glad," was all that any of them could say to that. In the community, an isolated town, one of the scant dozen on an island the size of Australia, every single life was precious, a community possession. The loss of any one person was a personal loss to them all.

"Y'know," the doc said, unbuttoning his coat and leaning back on his elbows. "The job is one hell of a toughie."

"We'll do it," Larry said pugnaciously.

"Sure. Sure. But look at the extent of Macquarie. A dozen towns, to scour the whole island, burning out the wild life." The doc shook his head. "It's a tall order."

"If we don't," Larry said stubbornly. "It means we won't be able to live here much longer. We'll be forced off. Our

flocks, our crops—and now our kids. I can't afford to give up my investment here. Nor can anyone else." He paused. " That is," he added, " anyone except Mister Captain Stopford here. He can space off at any time he likes."

Stopford stilled his natural response. He said : " I'm part of Macquarie Island now, Larry. Your troubles are my troubles. You can expect me in the firing line when the drive starts."

The doc spluttered. " You can't do it like that !" he said. " Haven't you any idea of the size of the island ? We'll need miles and miles of electrified fencing—and that won't stop the eagles."

" Or the bugs," said Sally morosely, swabbing the bar. She tumbled the curled corpses of bugs that had, in their infuriating way, crept past the spray defences of the hotel. It was a full time job, carting off the bug bins to the incinerators. Curtains, nets, sprays, dusting powder—all the recognised anti-louse methods could not keep the enemy in check. They'd be running alive, soon.

" So what do you suggest, then, doc ?" asked Larry.

The doc shrugged helplessly. " I'm hanged if I know. I suppose we'll have to extend the cleared areas around the towns gradually. The Marshal has radioed the Governor and requested mini-radar equipment. That should help us spot the eagles before they have chance to strike."

Larry smiled and swivelled to face Stopford. " That should be a job for you, Stopford. What'll it feel like, spotting and shooting at eagles, instead of enemy warships from Barjolm ?"

" If it'll help Macquarie, it'll all come the same."

" There you are—" began Sally.

" Quite the patriot !" said Larry. He finished his drink and slammed the glass onto the black body of a bug crawling on the counter. " I'm off. See you, doc. Sally."

Stopford watched him go and then his attention was taken by the growing commotion in the street. Before he had time to move away from the bar, the marshal strode in. He was livid. He drank two whiskies straight, and then said : "Those boars. Getting more damned insolent every day."

" What happened ?" asked the doc.

The boars were the omnivorous quadrupeds—they looked not unlike boars, with heavy snouts and two curved tusks.

The marshal drank before answering. " A couple were in Will Schmidt's corn. He went to drive them off and they

attacked him. Quite deliberate. Gashed his leg bad. His kid shot one and Will finished off the other. Touch and go."

"I'd better go see," said the doc, drinking up and going out quickly.

"Damn beasts," the marshal said again. "Well, I've had word from the Governor. He's sending all the poison and mini-radars and guns they can spare—"

"I should think so too," said Sally indignantly. "They haven't got our troubles !"

"No," Stopford said under his breath. "I wonder why ?"

"If I were you, Stopford," the marshal said heavily, "I'd pack up and leave Macquarie. You'd be far more comfortable on Governor's or Ffoulkes."

"Are you telling me to leave, Crampton ?"

"No. No, of course not." The marshal laughed uneasily and glanced at Sally. "Just thought you'd like to take the opportunity of catching a ride on the jet going for the supplies. Can't see what you want to stay here for, anyway."

"Maybe I like the people," Stopford said, feeling anger rising. "I can't say the island itself is very attractive."

To his surprise Crampton made no answer to this. He just looked from Stopford to Sally, and then asked for another drink. As Sally served him, Stopford had the puzzled unease that stems from an incomplete understanding of what is happening. Then the marshal lowered his glass and, speaking very seriously, told Stopford a fact that alarmed and disheartened him.

"Haven't you ever considered, Stopford, that the island's troubles really began to get bad after you arrived ? The bugs always have been bad, but these depredations of the eagles—your pets !—and the boars and the others are getting worse and worse every day. Before you came things were bearable."

"Are you suggesting—but that's crazy !" Stopford felt a hot flush over his face and neck.

"All I'm saying, Stopford, is that these people are worried. They can see what has been happening. They can see that the situation has exploded since you arrived. So okay, so maybe we know that's coincidence. But pioneers on a new planet, cut off from most of civilisation, tend to revert, to go back to the comforting superstitions of their ancestors—who were pioneering on Earth thousands of years ago. They seek out reasons and omens—and the finger's on you, Stopford !"

Chapter III

For the next few days Stopford lay very low. He kept himself out of the public eye. As soon as pension day came around in the month he walked down to the Post Office and drew off his full allowance. The clerk raised an eyebrow.

" Not leaving your usual twenty percent in for a rainy day, Mr. Stopford ?"

Stopford was not prepared for polite conversation.

" No. Need it all. Going on a trip."

He went out. He even considered withdrawing all his meagre savings ; but sanity prevailed and he left his sheet-anchor intact.

Sally soon discovered that Stopford was making a trip. If Stopford hadn't known better, he would have imagined that she was angling for an invitation to accompany him ; but as he was not in the habit of going on hunting trips into lonely and hostile country with a young and attractive woman he did not allow the imagination to form—it was too attractive.

The day he set out was bright and cheerful, with a high blue sky, trailing cirrus, touched with early sun and with an intoxicating air filled with the scent of woodland and flower —and with the lurking peril of swooping eagles and predatory boars.

Crampton met him on the town outskirts.

" Have a good trip, Stopford."

" I hope to." Stopford shifted his rifle onto the other shoulder. He hesitated. " Ah—Crampton. Anything more to tell me ? I mean, I don't believe you, mind you ; but I'm interested in your theory."

" It's no theory. It's a fact."

" Maybe. Nothing fresh ?"

" Nothing you can put your finger on. We've contacted the Governor. He's sending us poison and flame-throwers. They'll be here in about a week."

" I'll be back to help."

" I wouldn't bother. The townspeople feel like I told you. You might not believe it ; but it would be healthier for you to take notice of it."

Stopford felt his anger rising, and patiently and with dogged resignation he forced it down. He said : " But I want to help. Macquarie is as much my island as it is theirs."

" They don't think so."

" Hell—I fought Barjolm ! They didn't. I got wounded out in space, I was one of the mugs who went for the glory out there just so people like them could come here and live in peace. I've got *more* right to Macquarie than they have !"

" If you've finished boasting about your space-navy days," the marshal said, " I've got business to attend to. Goodbye." He walked off.

Stopford stared after him. Then he kicked at a stone violently, almost swung himself over as his wounded leg jabbed angrily at his nerves, and marched off towards the woods, swearing and cursing to himself. Island full of ignorant, childish, superstition-ridden, ungrateful louts !

By the third day of his safari he was back in good humour. His camera case was satisfactorily full of fine shots of wild-life, of trees tossing against sunred horizons, of waterfalls plunging in a glory of scarlet and silver as the trailing weeds stained the waters like veined marble.

In all that time he had, although pestered by bugs and creepy-crawly things, not been bothered by a purple eagle or a boar. For the boars he had no feelings. If one became too incautiously hostile and nosey, then it would be shot. As for a purple eagle—he badly wanted to see one again, to capture its superb majesty on film. He had a nasty suspicion that they were dying out, that in any case they would be stamped out, and he regretted that. He could do little to halt the process ; he could at least record what they had looked like.

Only when he'd about decided it was time he back-tracked did he come across any evidence of strangeness. Even then —was it evidence ? And, on an alien planet, just how strange could events become before you tagged them that ?

He was angling his way down a valleyside, splay-leaved ferns and patches of blueberry bracken catching at his knees. The far horizons opened out beyond the v-shaped notch of the valley mouth ; a far-off bar of blue and silver haze, with the hint of mountains rising somewhere off in the interior. The air was crystal. Apart from the crackling noise of his progress everything was quiet ; silence that had a meaning, he felt sure and in grasping at the meaning found irritation that it continually eluded him.

Loneliness had never bothered Stopford ; spacemen grow the knack of living with themselves, and in long periods without conversation he had found the way to an inner peace

that had returned to him now on this safari into unknown country. He could think of Sally without tremor ; he could imagine the preparations for exterminating the wild life without a blinding rush of indignation. He could—just—reconcile himself to the understanding that the colonists of Macquarie just didn't like him.

Then he stumbled over a twisted stem, his pack slid off the one shoulder strap he was using, and he fell awkwardly. Cursing himself for carelessness—a twisted ankle here meant certain death—he stood up gingerly and gathered his spilled possessions.

The rifle was missing.

He began to search at once. That he had not so far needed to use it on this trip meant nothing ; he remembered Jennie Blythe screaming as the eagle carried her off.

And the damn thing had cost a great deal of money, too.

His foot went through a patch of fern and amidst a choking cloud of brown dislodged spores he crashed helplessly through the green crust. He struck matted mold and lay a moment, winded. It was not dark ; the sun shone in greenly filtered light from above, as though he were under a waterfall. His foot, thankfully, was uninjured and he did not seem to have done any further damage to his wounded leg.

Cautiously, he stood up and looked about him.

Scattered over the carpet of mould and moss and dried branches were hundreds of bones. Picked clean, they glimmered with the greenish light, shading from bright white crisp bones to old, cracked, brown stained lumps that must have lain there for years. Stopford whistled in surprise.

He must have fallen into the lair of some wild beast—and all his experience of alien life on this island told him that his best plan was to get out quicker than he had entered.

He stared up. The opening he had torn was a jagged hole, fern-rimmed. There was a possible purchase on a stem or two, and with a brisk thrust of one foot on the earthen wall, he might do it. He flexed his muscles. The movement had changed his position and a stab of reflected light glanced into his eyes. Looking down he saw his rifle lying in the shadows, with a single star of light winking in reflection from the hole above his head.

That, he thought with satisfaction, grasping the weapon, had been a stroke of luck. Not only had he found the rifle

again, but now it could serve him as a crutch to get out. But his stooping position revealed something else.

A nest had been scraped together against the far wall. Dead leaves, twigs from the vines and shreds of mould had been scraped up into a softly padded cup. In the nest were four small skeletons. Stopford saw at once that they were the young of the boar. Each bone was meticulously picked clean —the louse part of that applied with considerable force.

So the wild animal wouldn't be coming back. It had gone off one day to hunt for food and had not returned. And its young had starved to death and had then been eaten by the bugs. A common enough tragedy.

Stopford thought no more about it. Instead he concentrated on scrambling out of the cave. Once out onto the valleyside again he wiped the sweat away and sat down for a breather. His forlorn old wideawake hat lay near to hand and he put it on to shield his face from the sun.

High above him he saw a purple eagle drift regally by, silent on wide pinions. He watched it. He began to take pictures, using the telephoto lens and a filter.

That the animal life of this alien island was in a turmoil he knew well enough. He supposed it was because man had set up housekeeping here; but then, the Barjolm had been here before, hadn't they? Had things been as bad then?

A scuttering in the ferns brought his attention back to his surroundings. The camera was laid aside with alacrity. He grasped the rifle. Then a small, rodent-like animal crept out of the greenery, hunted about with prehensile nose, skittered forward, halted, stood stock still. He had never seen its like on Macquarie before. The animal was small and brown and quick-limbed. Its sides throbbed. As an alien monster it was no great shakes.

The purple eagle had seen it, too. In a long silent rush of bright plumage, the eagle stooped on the rodent, snatched it up in raking talons.

Stopford half raised the rifle, then relaxed. This was the way of the world—of this world as much as that of Earth. The eagle was entitled to its dinner.

What happened next puzzled him. As the eagle rose it changed direction, planed down and for all the world took on the appearance of an aircraft dodging a fighter plane. Then he saw the other eagle. There was no difference between the

two mighty birds that he could see. The second eagle bored in, claws raking forward.

Fascinated, he watched as the two giant birds struggled. He began again to take pictures.

The air resounded with their angry cries and squawks. He could hear quite clearly the thunder of their wings, flailing to keep them airborne. The first bird clung grimly to the rodent which Stopford could see was still alive and struggling. He had half expected the second eagle to attempt to snatch the prey away ; but the two birds were battling it out with the evident intention of settling with each other.

Stopford guessed that they saw a larger dinner in another bird of their size than in the little rodent.

At last the first bird was forced to drop the rodent to bring its talons into action. Neither bird stopped the fight to watch the dropped prey ; they battled frantically.

The fight drifted gently with the wind and when it passed over the crest of the hill behind him, Stopford had seen not the slightest evidence of any slackening in the ferocity of the battle. He debated whether or not to walk back up the valley side and then, thinking of his leg, decided against it. When dog eats dog, he ruminated, rising and starting off downhill again, the situation must be very rough indeed.

Chapter IV

In the sheer physical nearness of the town as he made his way back, Stopford felt a growing return of his worry over the colonists' attitude to him. The marshal had given him a problem, and now, returning to town, it came back with full force. He checked in again at his hotel, pleased to see Sally again, and dismayed at her drawn face and the hangdog looks of defiance worn by the townsfolk. In the few days that intervened before the supplies arrived from the Governor, he fretted and smoked too much and cleaned and oiled his rifle three times a day and worried himself into losing his appetite. All the benefit of his safari was lost. He avoided Sally.

Even though, now, he couldn't explain satisfactorily to himself just why he was staying—he could have paid his way to another island if not off the planet—he knew that he would stay. He would help the islanders fight the eagles and the

beasts of the forests. With the men and boys of a dozen towns to cover the island, he did not feel great confidence.

His confidence in defeat did not stop him offering his services. They were refused. He watched the men set off.

Inevitably, they failed.

The helicopters slanted back to town, forlornly, like truant schoolboys home after dusk. The ground cars lumbered in dusty and scratched. Tempers were short. The women walked circumspectly, knowing that their men would be black-browed and harsh of tongue for many weeks to come. The supplies sent in by the Governor had been added to their own resources and used up—to no avail. The picket lines had bent, the electrified fences had been broken through at a score of places.

The few animals he had seen on his own travels and the now almost nightly depredations on farms told their own story. The animals could call their own tune. There were woods and forests in the interior that would take armies and years to clear with these primitive weapons.

That night the town square was alive with distorted shadows flung from prowling, restless men, edgy, aware of the future. Yellow glare from strung lamps puffed down on wild eyes and upflung hands. No-one had an idea. There was no order—Crampton, the marshal, was politically absent. Ugly violence was the only outlet the islanders had for their sense of the injustice of it all.

Someone brought in a purple eagle snared by his son. The men tore it to pieces—in an almost symbolic act. You could smell the anger and the violence, running like hot dust along the streets.

As the night darkened, Stopford sat alone in his hotel room, thinking. He had about decided that his pride was a thing he could dispense with when Sally knocked on the door and glided swiftly in without waiting for an answer. She shut the door and leaned back on it.

" Stop ! You've got to get away. They're coming for you."

" But that's silly ! What do they want with me ?"

He knew, of course.

He said : " These are civilised men. They are members of the human race who have conquered space, have travelled from star system to star system, have seen the force of nature. They can't blame me for their ecological disturbances !"

Sally half laughed, and caught it on a sob. " They do ! Oh, sure, we're super-civilised human beings ; but now we're fighting for our lives and our property on a hostile and alien planet. Atropy and atavism. You revert, Stop. You go back a bit, to regather some of the spirit that brought our own ancestors out of their caves to face the ice with fire, and the sabre-tooth with a chip of flint. Your ideas of gracious living get pushed a little on one side."

" Yes. I can see that. Waste, though, pitiful waste."

" Well, as long as you do see it you'd better get moving. You haven't much time."

Stopford knew better than to ask where he should go. Anywhere on Macquarie Island, now, would be better than this town. And immediately thereafter, anywhere on Belvedere would be better than Macquarie. He packed in deft-fingered silence, took his express rifle, and turned for the door.

Sally did not say anything. Stopford turned back, put down his bundle, grabbed Sally and kissed her.

" I'll be back—someday," he said—and then they both realised that the situation was out of hand. Emotions neither had envisioned supervened. Civilisation—perhaps for the last time for a long while on Macquarie—came to them. They laughed at the corny dialogue. And then Stopford, silent and grim and frightened, was running down the stairs and along the darkened streets and away into the forests.

He was lucky. Not until he had reached the next town on the coast was he reminded of his wound. Then his leg began to throb and he knew he could not go on much farther.

One of his quondam friends—Larry, Crampton, the doc—even Blythe—would have long since rung the marshal of this town and alerted them. Stopford had little hope that in trying to explain why they wanted him they would wake up to the primitive savagery of their actions. Any excuse would do. So it was that he skirted the town edge cautiously, his rifle ready, and made for the nearest outlying farm. There he waited all through one blistering day, with the little bugs running up and down his legs and driving him near crazy. Again he was thankful that no flying insects buzzed to trouble him.

At nightfall he reconnoitred the place and lifted the helicopter from the barn. He made himself a promise to return it as soon as that was humanly possible.

By midmorning of the day following he was running short of

fuel and the sea beneath appeared never ending as the long blue of Ffoulkes rose above the horizon. He just made it.

He went at once to the marshal of the seaport town and explained the whole situation and asked that the helicopter be flown back—at his expense. That would take care of his pension for some time to come.

The semi-complicated legalities out of the way and the marshal assured that Stopford was no public enemy type of criminal, there was time to check in at an hotel, to bath and relax and to think about what had happened. Ffoulkes was an island with as different an atmosphere from Macquarie as might be imagined. Here the fields were fat with livestock, waving with rich ripe crops, industry hummed and people walked with the brisk, businesslike gait of the out-of-doors townsman.

Here was a small splinter of civilisation. Macquarie, Stopford realised sadly, was on the path of retrogression.

He did not like it. He'd been run out of town on a rail—well, metaphorically. If the mob had caught him he did not think his chances of ever getting away would have been bright. And that began, out of reaction, to make him angry.

Just because it was accepted that hardship did not ennoble but degraded, these rustics on Macquarie had allowed their ill-natures to burst out. To hell with them ! He'd been an idiot to have stayed one day extra on Macquarie than was necessary. Come to think of it, it had never been necessary to stay on Macquarie.

He should have come to Ffoulkes a long time ago. As soon as he had discovered that Macquarie people were in trouble with the birds and beasts of their island he should have left.

Of course—he would have left Sally, too.

So he immediately began planning how best to go back.

Chapter V

The marshal, a heavy-set man with iron-grey hair, who, if his name hadn't happened to be Massenet, would have been confused with Crampton the Macquarie marshal, so alike were they, called on Stopford. They sat in the basket lounge of the hotel, in civilised comfort, drinking. Massenet was perturbed at the news Stopford gave him.

" We all knew things were bad over there," he said. " But

their treatment of you indicates that they're no longer capable of thinking properly. When the Barjolm owned this planet they had stories of Macquarie being unpleasant. We didn't pay much attention ; but I guess that must be why there were so few wanted to settle it."

" I suppose room could be found for them on the other islands ? After all, they're pretty big—I mean, the planet is mostly ocean, with—what is it, fifteen ?—islands scattered about. And the Barjolm usually know what they're talking about on these subjects. I've met 'em."

" You were space-navy, weren't you, Stopford ?"

" Yes."

" Well, we could settle them elsewhere ; but that would not be popular. The Governor has been trying to work out a plan ; but no islands want new people, they all plan to expand."

" You mean from their own descendants ? That's logical."

" Sometimes I think the Barjolm did us in the eye when they assigned various planets at the peace treaty."

" I'm convinced that there's something basically wrong with Macquarie . . ." Stopford broke off as his eyes, looking unseeingly towards the revolving doors, took in the remarkable sight of an alien walking in. At first he tensed up. The alien was a Barjolm. His liquid walk, his air of smooth flowing motion, reminded Stopford of the times he had fought these people in the gulfs between the stars. Then he relaxed. There was a peace on now. They were all friends.

Mazzale turned out to be a friendly type ; he smiled at Stopford as the marshal introduced them and before he was quite aware of how it had occurred, Stopford found himself seated with the other two round a little table, drinking his soft drink and entering with zest into the most stimulating conversation he had enjoyed in many weeks. Mazzale had lived on Belvedere most of his life. He was a doctor. When the Earthman had arrived on their takeover mission he had given up his practice and retired, unwilling to be uprooted. The Terrestrials, with uncommon magnanimity had allowed him to stay and now he was the better sort of local public figure.

Like most of his fellows, he was slightly built, with large dark eyes, a friendly smile and the graciously flowing movements that rightly belonged on ancient Indian temples lost in the jungles of the east, back on Earth.

His English was impeccable.

Mazzale accepted the drink Stopford offered on the second round and said lazily : " What brings you to Ffoulkes, Mr. Stopford ?"

Stopford smiled wryly. " I thought of retiring on Belvedere, like yourself. Unfortunately, I chose Macquarie."

" Ah," Mazzale nodded wisely. " I understand. We had quite a deal of trouble with Nansitoong—that was what we called the island. It means ' Bad Air.' But we'd made it habitable for the Barjolm before—well, before the change of ownership."

" Well," Stopford said, " It most certainly isn't fit for human life now. Although, mind you, I've heard that the metabolism, the basic needs, of the Barjolm and the Terrans differ. You're a doc, you'd know about that."

The alien caressed his glass gently. " That is true. Our needs are different. But it would seem, from the reports I've been hearing, that this island is bad for both races. My information is not strictly detailed, just that the Governor was fully justified in sanctioning the entire destruction of the fauna of Nansitoong. Even that, we Barjolm might have found too much for us to stomach."

Both the marshal and Stopford glared at the alien, and then both drank deeply. It was a sore point. Stopford said : " You haven't been on the island—at least, lately. It's pretty rugged."

Mazzale smiled again ; it was a racial trait. " True, Mr. Stopford. I have not. The last time I was there was during our clearing preparations, when we made it fit for habitation. We Barjolm are peculiarly susceptible to disease, as you probably know. We are an old race."

Old and wise and cunning, thought Stopford heavily. But this fellow Mazzale seemed a decent sort, and in the conversations that followed that first meeting, Stopford was wryly amused to find himself coming to like the smooth alien. They took to going on walks together. Mazzale knew a very great deal about Belvedere. One day they had heliflitted to a greenly rounded peak of the Dodge mountains and now reclined on the grass, looking down over the lush valleys spread below.

A coppery bird, huge and magnificent, floated past on silent wings. Stopford watched it. As he looked it swooped, a golden lance of power, stooping on a small fluttery bird, all feather and squawks, that had the moment before been

bubbling along just above the treetops. Stopford brushed a midge away from his face and followed the great bird until it was a dot in the blue. Only after it had vanished did he turn to Mazzale.

" What do you call that bird, Mazzale ?"

" A Copper Eagle. It is peculiar to Ffoulkes."

" Like the Purple Eagle is peculiar to Macquarie."

" That is so. I have been reading about your Terran Darwin. The man who told you that you and the apes were relations."

" A great man. Wasn't there a Colas Lashmin ?"

Mazzale laughed. " You know Barjolmian history, then, Mr. Stopford ?"

" No. But I'm always ready for that one."

" Yes, Lashmin was to us as Darwin was to you. But Lashmin did not have the great index figure of those islands—what were they called ?"

" You mean the Galapagos Islands ?"

" Galapagos. Yes, that was the name. Lashmin was forced to come to his great evolutionary theory without that guide. I thought of that as soon as I arrived on Belvedere, years ago."

Stopford sat up. He brushed impatiently at the midges seeking to alight on his lips and eyes. " You mean to say," he said slowly, " that Belvedere—all the islands on the planet —are in the same relation to one another as the islands of the Galapagos group back on Earth ?"

" But of course." Mazzale was mildly amused. " I thought that was common knowledge."

" Not to me it isn't," said Stopford. He brought his hand round in a sharp slap against his cheek. Then he picked off the crushed little body, oozing fluid, and stared at the six spindle legs and four delicate wings and the overlarge head.

" Does this academic knowledge disturb you, then ?"

" No. Why should it." Stopford was lying and Mazzale knew it. Stopford tried again. " It shouldn't disturb me," he said, honestly trying to frame his worries. " But it does. No reason. Just that I feel queasy about it—which," he finished, jumping up, " is darn silly. Come on. I need a nice long cool drink."

When he was alone that night in the hotel room, with the air conditioner humming just on the threshold of audibility and the electronic anti-midge screens up, Stopford thought on what Mazzale had told him.

The scattered islands on Belvedere each contained a unique fauna, as did the islands of the Galapagos. By unique was meant the word means ; nowhere else on Earth were there found the birds and flightless cormorants, giant tortoises, tropical penguins and marine iguanas. And, from Darwin's finches, specialised for different specific functions, it had been discovered how species adapt to fit a special niche in the ecological framework. Here on Belvedere the animals and plants had specialised out, each group distinct on each island. But on Belvedere evolution had been carried one further step. One niche was here filled by one specie and one specie alone. There were only the Eagles ; there were no hawks or falcons or any other great bird of prey.

Today Stopford had seen a Copper Eagle stoop upon a funny little feathery bird that had seemed helpless. But that fluttery bird lived ; it, in its turn, must hunt and feed upon something. And so on, all the way down. Stopford lit his last cigarette for the night and then, two hours and ten half-smoked cigarettes later, decided he'd best call it a day and turn in. His head ached, his eyes smarted and he wanted a word with Mazzale first thing in the morning.

Stopford was aroused earlier than he liked the following morning by a telephone call. It was a personal call from Macquarie Island. The radio signal came in loud and clear, and Sally's voice had never sounded so good.

" Stop ? Are you all right ?"

" Fine. You ?"

There was the sound of an indrawn breath.

" So-so. Thanks for sending that heli back. Your name still stinks ; but not so bad. That and Jennie Blythe."

" Sally—can I come back to Macquarie ?"

" Stop—you crazy ? You haven't asked why I'm ringing."

At once he was contrite. " Sorry. I haven't. Why ?"

Her voice lost some of the synthetic sparkle. She became serious, and as she talked Stopford's fears grew and crystallised into paralysing fright.

" Things are pretty bad, Stop. Not so-so at all. I'm scared. Two kids going back from school were snatched by Eagles. Both were seen to go. A farmer and his family were caught defenceless and killed by boars. The animals seem crazy."

" Sally," Stopford said. He swallowed. " What can I do ?"

She went on as though he hadn't spoken, as though she were reciting a list. " A whole herd of sheep driven off and they

found their bones up in the hills. Oh—the wild animals haven't suddenly developed brains ; it's not that. But they attack anything on sight now. It's not safe to walk out even with a rifle on your own." Her voice tightened. " And the bugs are driving everyone insane. We're all—scratching—get off, you beast !—now. That's another creepy crawly."

" Sally," Stopford said, raising his voice. " Cut it. Come on over to Ffoulkes—"

" That's what I wanted to ask you. A deputation is going to the Governor. They want to move all the women and children off, and then all the lifestock they can. Then they want to poison gas and dust the whole island. They want to wipe everything out and afterwards bring in terrestrial animals."

" Drastic, but sensible . . ."

He knew he didn't mean that.

Sally said simply : " You once said you wanted to come back. Did you mean that ?"

" Yes." He paused, thinking what he was saying. " Yes. I did mean that."

" I'd wondered if you might be planning to leave Belvedere—? I'd have liked to have known. This is a bitter island, Stop . . ."

He waited for her to go on ; but the line was silent and it took some time for him to realise that the connection had been broken. The line was dead. He checked with the operator who told him the auto machinery was functioning perfectly on Ffoulkes ; the break in transmission originated on Macquarie. so that was that. The break might mean anything or nothing. Consumed with anxiety for Sally as he was, all he could do was to ask the marshal for early news.

He couldn't find Mazzale. This set-back inflamed his fretful temper. He prowled the town, going to the jetty and staring across the sea towards Macquarie invisible beyond the far horizon. Then he stumped back to the hotel. He could imagine only too vividly what might be happening in Sally's hotel. Great purple Eagles, thrusting in for the kill, boars tossing their way through the streets—he laughed, shortly. His imagination was running away with him. If anything was sure it was that the humans could stand a siege of their town by any of the other animal life on Macquarie.

Except, perhaps, the bugs ?

Mazzale had been on a fishing trip. He walked into the hotel with silver and green scales still clinging to his clothes, a mildly enquiring look on his face. " I hear you've been turning the town upside down looking for me ?"

Stopford had to pause and take a conscious control over himself. He was aware that he was all worked up and at the same time could stand off and view that engagement with a wry detachment that poked fun at it all. He was getting too old for this sort of emotional racking.

" Yes, I have, Mazzale," he said crisply. " Come and have a drink. I want to ask you more about Nansitoong."

The marshal came in as they were speaking. He told them that his opposite number on Macquarie had put through a call at last. The island was in turmoil. Everyone was packing up. The Governor had provisionally agreed to the bombing and destruction plan, although hating every bit of it.

" It's going to cost those folks plenty, too. That sort of operation comes high. They'll be in mortgage for the rest of their lives."

Mazzale was horrified. " Destroy all those living creatures?" he said, aghast. " But don't you realise that they are unique ? There aren't any others like that anywhere else in the galaxy."

Stopford said : " They nearly wiped out the Galapagos wild life through their piggy greed for money. Wasn't until over a hundred years after Darwin that they got around to realising that they ought to protect the Galapagos. I think Macquarie is going to be squeezed—unless you can tell me what I want to know."

" If you think you can save the island," the marshal said doubtfully."

" I don't know," Stopford replied irritably. " It's a big thing—how in hell do I know what I can do until I know all the facts. One thing is sure, though—that is that there must be a better way than the one they've decided on."

" I agree." Mazzale was positive. " This act would be barbarous, insane—quite unworthy of a civilisation that is reaching out for the stars."

" When it's your farm and your crops trampled and your kids carried off," the marshal said tiredly. " Well, I guess I'd go along with those poor folks. Yes, sir."

" How did your people cope with this problem ?" Stopford asked Mazzale.

The alien moved his shoulders and upper arms. " We did not have this problem, Mr. Stopford. Only recently have I learned just what is troubling your people there ; it has blown up so quickly, as you know. These depredations are quite new."

Stopford felt that strange quiver of interest again ; a tremor of unease. He said : " Well, then, if you didn't have this problem what was it ? You said Nansitoong was ' Bad Air ' and that might mean anything—" Stopford stopped speaking.

Then, very carefully, he said : " I suppose the translation of Nansitoong into ' Bad Air ' is an English translation, Mazzale ?"

" Of course."

Stopford stood up and finished his drink at one gulp. He banged the glass down on the table and said to the marshal : " Massenet, can you arrange a meeting with the Governor ? Real fast ?"

" We-el, I guess so. He's pretty busy right now—"

" Come on. You too, Mazzale, if you can spare the time to save an island of Terrestrials—and the native fauna, as well. Massenet, get in touch with the Governor right away."

Chapter VI

Only the return of Stopford's old brusque spacenavy habits and forceful personality carried them through. The Governor, a much harassed man, when at last he consented to see them was quickly made aware of his foolishness in not seeing them earlier. The trio had flown over to Governor's Island in a fast jet and as a result of their talks they were on their way, first back to Ffoulkes and then, after an intensive and exhausting week's work, to Macquarie.

The lack of any thorough botanical and ecological work on Belvedere showed up now. The war had swept away the niceties of planetary exploration before colonisation and Earth, on the acquisition of Belvedere, had simply moved her colonists in on the strength of Barjolmian reports. The uniqueness of the Belvedere island ecological structures, if it had been noticed at all, had been of little importance beside the tasks of building houses and roads, of sowing crops and raising herds. Life came before luxuries on frontier worlds, even when, as now, it could be conclusively proved that a little more adherence to scientific luxuries would pay off handsome dividends.

Standing at last on the airfield, superintending the last piles of boxes, each with its carefully pierced and screened airholes, Stopford watched the boxes go one by one into the holds of the jet and felt his tiredness as an ache in his bones. The week of work on Ffoulkes had taken it out of him, and had finally reduced his bank balance to a nice round figure. That there were no digits before the nice round figure now did not worry him in the least. In paupering himself, he had found the best answer to the Macquarie's Islanders doubts and suspicions of himself.

The Governor had helped, of course. He had at once seen that Stopford's scheme was infinitely cheaper than the one put forward by the Islanders. They had packed up and left, and their womenfolk were living in cramped quarters on Marchetti and Ffoulkes. Sally, as was the way in these rapid organisations had gone to Marchetti. Stopford had had no time to visit her.

The plane took off. The flight back to Macquarie took a short time, in marked contrast to Stopford's escape in the helicopter. As the aircraft slanted in over the beach, Stopford looked down.

" Looks peaceful enough," commented the marshal.

" Skin deep," said Stopford, sourly.

At the airport the Macquarie marshal, Crampton, Larry, the doc, Blythe, a dozen others, were waiting. Their faces were drawn and lined and the fanatical glow in their eyes disturbed Stopford. They looked like militant scarecrows, anarchistic zombies.

" You've got the bombs ?" " Plenty of poison ?" " Flame throwers in good shape ?" These were the first questions, before any thought of greetings.

It sickened Stopford. Then they saw him as he stepped down from the plane.

" Stopford !" Larry cried, filthy as usual. " What in hell do you want back here ?"

" You staying on when the hormone bombs come down ?" someone jeered.

There was a ragged, cruel laugh. Stopford, poised on the last step, waited for silence, staring down on their ring of upturned faces. Then, speaking quietly, he said : " I know how you men feel. I understand your concern over your homes and your livlihood. I am a man of Macquarie ; don't forget that."

" Well, what's the good of coming back now ? Get on with it, marshal, let's get these stinking birds wiped out."

Everyone was scratching, automatically, all the time.

Stopford held up a hand ; but it was Massenet, the Ffoulkes marshal, who obtained silence.

" Mr. Stopford has something to say to you. He wants to explain why we aren't going to wipe out the fauna here."

There was a stunned, a shocked, an unbelieving silence.

" Not—going—to—" They were raging. " What dirty double-cross goes on here ?"

Stopford shouted angrily ; he was heartily sick of the whole business. " You savages want to make the island a fine place to live so you want to kill off these creatures, who are unique in the galaxy. Well, there's a better way, nature's way. And that's the way it's being done." He gestured to the plane's crew. " Get those boxes unloaded."

There was a scuffle. The islanders tried to stop what was going on, even though they didn't understand. As the first box was placed on the ground Larry ran forward, an axe in his hand. He brought the sharp steel down in a crunch of splinters. Stopford laughed.

From the box a cloud rose, a singing, buzzing, swirling could of midges, gnats, flies ; winged insects that circled and then streamed off into the air.

The islanders stood now, watchful, open-mouthed, as box after box disgorged its quota of gnats.

" Tomorrow," said Stopford grimly, " We unload the little birds."

No-one seemed to be very clear what was happening. In place of bombs and poisons, insects and birds ! Who was crazy around here ?

The work went on. The Governor played up and other aircraft made the journey, bringing in fresh flying insects, insect-catching birds, larger birds to eat those, and steadily up the scale of size and power. The islanders called a meeting and talked into the night and the following morning. They sent off protest messages to the Governor. The reply daunted them.

" Captain Stopford, TSN, Retd., is deputy Governor on Macquarie Island."

At last Stopford called a halt. All the boxes had disgorged their contents. The air was filled with flying insects, swift winged birds, fluffy birds with great claws.

The doc called on Stopford where he had installed himself in Sally's hotel. He deigned to share a drink.

" Well, Stopford, get it off your chest."

" The island will take a little time to get back to normal shape, ecologically speaking," Stopford answered, smiling. " But the basis is laid. You see, when the Barjolm made this island habitable, they did what we might well have done in their position. Remember that the fauna here is on the step principle ; there is one specie to fill every evolutionary niche. Tell me, doc, what did the Barjolm call Macquarie ?"

" Nansitoong."

" And that means ?"

" How the hell do I know ? I don't speak Barjolmian."

" Strictly translated into English, it means ' Bad Air.' But you'd recognise it better as Malaria."

" Malaria. Yeah, the Barjolm have a disease just like that. Caused by a thing not unlike Anopheles—" He paused. "You haven't let loose a horde of mosquitoes, have you ?"

" Of course not. Just flying insects to replace the Anopheles-type mosquitoes that the Barjolm destroyed. It's easy to do that—oil on water to kill the larva. But here, on Macquarie, where each specie depends on the next for food, the complete destruction of one type meant that those above in the food hunting scale would gradually starve."

" Yes—and below, these mosquito things lived off the bugs and things that have been driving us crazy."

"Precisely. The Barjolm cut one rung of the ladder clean out. Below, the bugs had a field day. Above, the birds and the Eagles and the boars, who lived on the ground animals of the chain that was cut at the mosquito level, starved.

" There are many links in the chain, I suppose. That's why it took some time for the effects to be clear."

" Many links. We'll trace them all out soon enough by seeing which specie breeds over-fast, and what appears always hungry. Those poor Purple Eagles—they must have been growing frantic at the lack of food."

" I alway said you had a soft spot for them."

" That spot has been supplanted," said Stopford.

" Oh ?"

" It shouldn't take long for the insects to breed so fast that they can keep the bug menace under control. The birds in the chain above will soon grow fat, and the Eagles will be able to live normally, without worrying about our sheep or our kids."

" Our kids ?" But the doc was getting the picture.

" Sure. If I'm to settle down on Macquarie—and has that phone been put in commission again ?"

" Yes."

Stopford went across to the instrument and put through a personal call to Marchetti.

" Sally," he said. " You all right ?"

Her tones were flat, heavy. " Yes. I guess so."

Stopford outlined what had been done. " Are you happy now ?" he asked.

" Sure." She had come alive again. " When are you coming to Marchetti—or shall I go across to Ffoulkes ?"

" Really, my dear," said Stopford, relishing this. " You come across to Macquarie straight away. We've got a lot of repopulating to do—all on our own."

—Nelson Sherwood

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THE TYCOONS

by ARTHUR SELLINGS

Chapter I

He belonged to a species that has been called—at one time or another—parasite, ghoul, leech, vampire.

He was an income tax inspector. His name was Oscar Raebone. A dedicated man, he regarded himself as a small, but vital, link in the administration of justice.

Every man must have a sense of purpose in his life, even if it consists only in selling the names of improbable horses to the innocents of the population—or writing science fiction stories, come to that. And with each purpose is linked a dream. The tipster dreams of a chain of longshots that will make his fortune and his name a thing of awe from Epsom to Newmarket. The science fiction writer—well, he dreams anyway—lives dreams, writes dreams, sometimes, alas, has to eat dreams.

And Oscar ?

Oscar dreamed of the day when he would spot some small discrepancy in some great company's accounts—a discrepancy

so minute that nobody else would have noticed it. That would be the fingernail under the veneer. His keen brain would follow through, stripping the cover of sham legality clean away, exposing the rottenness underneath. That was the dream that nourished his narrow existence.

Unfortunately for Oscar, his brain was not keen. He was only competent, serious, hard-working. He was so hard-working that he regularly took his work home with him, so that he never led much of a social life. By the time he was thirty-two he hadn't found himself a wife. Nor had he found himself a scandal lurking beneath columns of faked figures.

But if he hadn't been so hard-working, so attentive to points of detail, this story would never have been written. Not *this* story, and certainly not in English. And the irony was that Oscar never knew that he had, in fact, fortunate among men, achieved his dream—or something very much like it.

Which was probably just as well . . .

There was nothing about that bright May morning to hint that it was one of the crucial days in Earth's history. Birds were singing as Oscar walked to his office. The doorman saluted and said he wished he was at the Oval. Miss Cook bobbed her hair primly with one hand as she said, " Good morning, Mr. Raebone."

It was a very normal morning.

And the normal pile of work was awaiting him on his desk—balance sheets, accountants' reports, memoranda. By half past ten, devoted to his work as he was, he found himself stifling a yawn. The sun had moved around and was beaming hotly through his window. A monster among bluebottles was buzzing moronically to itself on the glass.

Oscar pulled himself together with a start and opened a fresh folder. It contained the accounts of a firm called Project Research Ltd., North Circular Road. He didn't recall the name. Yet it was in his district. Mildly curious, he looked down the neat accounts. Funny, there was no item of wages listed. Neither, he saw, were there any receipts—not a penny. Expenditure in the year just ended was three hundred and forty thousand pounds, plus. Income nil. He shrugged. That meant nothing. Many a company spent vast sums before it started making a copper. The accounts had no interest for him for tax purposes. They had only been sent in as the law required.

He went to close the folder, then stopped. There was nothing wrong in spending that amount of money—but spending it without paying out anything for direct labour ? Not one mechanic or lab assistant ? Not even a cleaner ?

Oscar sat pondering this fact for a moment. Then he flipped the intercom. " Miss Cook ? Give me what information we have on Project Research Ltd., will you ?"

While awaiting the information he went down the list of expenditure. April : General Electric, seventy thousand. May : Decca, sixty five thousand. June : Jackson Import Co., eleven thousand. July : General Electric, hundred and eight thousand—

Miss Cook was not long in coming in with the information. She read from an index. " Company founded seventh April last. Private Directors, Abel Jones, Mary Jones, Fred Smith. Capital (nominal) five hundred thousand. Business, technical research." She looked up.

" Is that all ?"

" Yes, Mr. Raebone."

" Mm-mm. Thank you, Miss Cook."

He pondered for some moments after she had returned to her outer office. He started to rise, paused to wonder whether it was just the bright summer day and not a sense of duty that called him, decided that it wasn't, completed the motion and reached for his hat.

" I'll be back before lunch," he informed Miss Cook on his way out.

The home of Project Research Ltd., was a single-storey red-brick building of modest proportions, a half-mile or so from Ballards Corner. It was windowless, Oscar noticed. There were no flamboyant signs over it such as graced most of the factories along here. Only a small plate by the front door announced its ownership. The front door was shut. No sound came from within. He pressed the bell.

No sound of ringing followed. He waited. He pressed again. He was about to turn away, to go round the building to look for another entrance, when the door opened.

A striking blonde regarded him impassively. A smile flashed on and off like a piece of mechanism.

" Good morning ?" she said questioningly. Oscar noticed that she was dressed in a white lab coat, and found himself wondering what she wore under it. He coughed.

" Good morning. I'm from the Inland Revenue, Income Tax."

" Yes ?" she said, and waited.

" I'd like to see your managing director."

She hesitated for only a moment. The smile flickered on and off again. " Why, certainly, Mr.—"

" Mr. Raebone."

" Ah, Mr. Raebone. Come inside."

She closed the door carefully behind them, then led Oscar down a bare corridor, from which, he noticed, no others branched, and into a small room. It was as bare as the waiting room of a county railway station. There was only one chair. The woman showed Oscar into it. " I'll just see if Mr. Smith is available," she said. She departed through a second door, set on the opposite side of the room.

Oscar sat there, looking around him. The walls were distempered a dark stone colour. The floor was of painted concrete. This bunch certainly didn't seem to waste money on the trimmings. There wasn't even a scrap of publicity on the walls, a trade journal or two strewn on a table. There wasn't even a table, come to that. And the woman seemed to match up with the surroundings. Bleak and functional, even down to the smile.

The woman came out. " This way, Mr. Raebone."

He followed her into an office. It was slightly less bare than the anteroom. He was conscious of the feel of coconut matting under his feet. He noticed a filing cabinet, a safe. But the main thing in the office was a large desk. Behind it was a large man. He rose to his feet as Oscar entered. His manner was expansive. A smile wreathed his round face. "Ah, Mr. Raebone," he boomed. " I'm Abel Jones." He shook hands powerfully. " What can I do for you ?"

Oscar recovered his fingers and smiled weakly.

" Just a routine call, Mr. Jones. We like to take an interest in our—ah, clients, so to speak."

" I understand, Mr. Raebone. Of course. I hope our accounts were properly prepared for you."

" I wish all the accounts I see were as straightforward," said Oscar graciously. " There was just one thing that struck me as odd. I see you enploy no labour."

" That's right, Mr. Raebone. Just the three of us—my sister here, myself and Mr. Smith. He's busy in the lab at the moment."

" And you do all the work between you ? The cleaning, even ?"

For a moment Oscar thought he detected uncertainty, a flickering of eyes toward the blonde standing to one side of him. Then the big man beamed.

" Yes, Mr. Raebone, *all*. There isn't all that much cleaning to be done. We all—er, pitch in. You see, with delicate apparatus about, it doesn't pay to have unskilled labour blundering around."

" Of course," said Oscar. " And naturally you have to think of security."

" Security ?" Again the eyes went wandering, more urgently this time, to the woman.

" Trade secrets and all that," Oscar explained brightly.

" Ah, yes. Of course, that does come into it, too."

Why, thought Oscar, does he seem almost relieved ? Or am I imagining things ?

" What's your line of research ?" he asked the big man.

The woman interposed. " It's all rather technical, Mr. Raebone."

" Yes, but what line is it in ?"

" Novelties," said Mr. Smith. " Novelties. We're hoping to develop certain—ah, gadgets, you understand."

" Novelties ? Sounds interesting. Great possibilities. We had a client in that line. Really big business now. Started with just a few novelties like dribbling glasses, rubber money, that kind of thing. Is that the kind of novelty you mean ?"

" Ah, yes. Well, something like that."

The blonde butted in again, coming round to face Oscar.

" You do understand, Mr. Raebone, that our research is confidential. Until we develop a finished product we naturally have to be cautious." Her smile was very winning, but gave Oscar the impression of being carefully manufactured.

" Of course," he said soothingly. " But you can rely on my discretion. All information given us is strictly confidential."

" But does it really concern your department ?" Her tone was suddenly ice-cold. " You say yourself that our accounts are in order."

The big man got in between them. " Don't mind my sister, Mr. Raebone." He smiled achingly. " She's naturally jealous of our achievments."

Oscar raised his hand reassuringly. " I can appreciate that. It's only that while I'm here I might as well have a look to see that the accounts match up with reality. It's surprising how easy it is to make a slip. You know—" his voice became reminiscent— " We had a firm once who built a whole new refrigerating plant and carelessly put it down to repairs on the old one. And you know, that's not quite the same thing in our eyes."

The blonde spoke with sudden vehemence. " We have no refrigerating plant here, Mr. Raebone. And you have no legal right of entry." She seemed to read the last sentence from a microfilm spooled up in her brain.

" Oh, dear," said Oscar. " You're taking me quite wrongly. This is only a friendly call, a kind of routine visit we make from time to time. It helps to avoid mistakes. I can see the kind of people you are—"

" You can ?" said the big man, his tone suddenly oddly flat.

" Of course. You're scientists, and scientists may be all right with higher math but they're inclined to get lost when it comes to accounts and balance sheets."

The big man laughed, somewhat loudly. " Of course. That's us. Just unpractical scientists."

" For instance," went on Oscar earnestly. " You sent in your full accounts to our office. That's not really necessary unless we ask for them. A balance sheet and accountant's certificate is enough."

" There, how silly of us. You're certainly very kind. And you'd like to look over our little outfit ? By all means. But our Mr. Smith has a rather difficult test on at the moment and the place is somewhat cluttered up with apparatus. But if you could make it tomorrow morning at, say, ten o'clock, I'd be only too happy to show you around."

" We-ell." Oscar was beginning to regret his persistence. There was nothing phony about these people. He knew the type. The idea they were working on was probably as unpractical as themselves, yet they were as jealous over it as a mother hen over her brood. The girl was really a bad case. Which was a pity, because her suspicious tenseness spoiled the effect of looks that were definitely something out of the ordinary. Still, he could hardly retreat now.

" I'll see you tomorrow at ten, then."

" Good, *good*. And I'll see if we can't get one of our novelties in working trim by then."

" Ah, I'd be interested to see it," Oscar murmured politely.

" This way," said the blonde.

Oscar left the place, shaking his head at his own stupidity. He should be chasing firms that padded their labour costs, not ones who didn't have any at all !

Chapter II

As soon as Oscar had left, the blonde Miss Jones faced her brother, her nostrils flaring with anger.

" You fool ! You utter, absolute fool ! Why make promises like that ? He has no legal right to enter."

The big man shrugged. " He can probably get the right. A search warrant or something, isn't that the term ?"

" I-I'm not sure."

" Well, you ought to be sure. It's your department."

" Hey—don't get at me ! Their laws are as complex as a Kronian jungle. I can't have everything at my fingertips every time you go sticking your neck out. Inviting him on a conducted tour ! *Saa hunen vridenkl* !"

Abel Jones laughed. " *Ah* ! now who's being careless ? You'd better not start slipping back into our native tongue in front of Mr. Raebone."

" All right brother," she said sullenly. " I admit I was wrong, but don't get off the point. You're indiscreet."

" And you're too careful," replied the big man easily. " Don't you see that we can arouse suspicion by being *too* cagey? You've got to be relaxed. When you start getting on your high horse like that—" He stopped for a moment, delighted. " Did you hear that—*high horse*, the idiom ? I—"

" Oh, stow it," she said caustically. " I can use the idiom, too."

" All right. But when you started like that I thought we were in for trouble. It's that man's job to investigate things which people want to keep hidden. So we couldn't give him the impression that we did. Do you see ?"

" Of course I see. But he was wavering at the end. You needn't have pressed it home."

Mr. Jones looked pained. " And have another official turning up ? We can't afford that. And we can easily convince Mr. Raebone. We naturally won't show him the basement and he'll never stumble across the door."

" Mm-mm, maybe." His sister seemed mollified, but only for an instant. " What was all that nonsense about having a novelty ready ?"

" Oh, *that* ? We'll rig some gadget up to satisfy him. You know how obsessed these people are with gadgets."

" But what ? A neat little model of a thought-control machine ?"

" Now, now, Mary. You mustn't make fun about that. No—a little gimmick of some kind. I'll think of something."

" Maybe," his sister mused, " it would have been easier all the way round to have given Mr. Raebone a brain bath. I was tempted as soon as he started asking questions."

Mr. Jones raised his hands in mock horror. " My own sister !"

" Are you getting soft ?"

" No, I'm not. I'm neither soft nor hard, and neither are you. It's a matter of necessity, we both know that. But how would it have been if little Mr. Raebone had gone back to his office and someone said, ' How did you get on at Project Research ?' and all Mr. Raebone could say was ' I forget ?' That would *really* start people getting suspicious. That just bears out what I said before. You lean over backward to avoid suspicion and that's the very way to start it."

At that moment the door opened and in came a bony high-cheeked man.

" Ah, Fred," said Mr. Jones. " How goes it ?"

" Fred, *Fred*," said that individual morosely. " Will I be glad when this whole business is over and we can go back to using our right names. In ancient Vidoo *Fred* means—well, something unmentionable in front of your sister."

" Now, buck up," said Abel expansively. " You don't think I like it any more than you, do you ? *Or* these clothes. Still, it won't be long now—" He added anxiously, " Will it ?"

" No, the test this morning ran to plan. I managed to rig these Earth components into something that's nearly as good as a Mark Two. It shows up on instruments okay, blankets out Earth E-E curves completely."

" So—how long ? Six months ?"

" With all of us working flat out, I think we can get the big transmitter in action by then. But I'd like to have a trial run on an Earthman under Earth conditions first, before I start on the big one."

" Don't worry, Fred. You know it worked perfectly on the Earthmen the Scout ship picked up."

" But that was with a Mark Two. This isn't a Mark Two. It doesn't even look remotely like a Mark Two. This adaptation has been hell."

" Of course, of course," said Abel Jones soothingly. " But we can't have it too easy. Our dear home world, things being as they are, just can't ship a thousand tons of plant all this way, and we can't expect it to. Anyway—" he brightened— " if it makes you feel any easier why not rig up a portable one-shot conditioner ? If that works satisfactorily with Earth components under Earth conditions that should satisfy you, shouldn't it ?"

Fred shrugged. " Oh, it's all right. It's just nerves, I suppose. I don't need the proof."

" But I do," said Abel Jones, his eyes gleaming. " Why, I've just had another idea. Between them, I think we shall be able to get on with our work in peace, without any worries or objections. First of all, we have a subject for the conditioner in Mr. Raebone—"

" Mr. Raebone ?" said Fred blankly.

" Yes, we had a visitor this morning." And he told him briefly of Oscar and his forthcoming visit on the morrow.

" Good grief," said Fred in immaculate, but none the less perturbed idiom. " If we're going to start getting snoopers round at this stage, I'll be right off my work. You know how nervous I am." He babbled on, "I know it's a weakness, and I know you can't have one thing without another. It's the law of compensations. When you get intellect at my advanced level, you just can't—"

Abel Jones raised a large and bland hand, interrupting the flow of the the other's misery. " Now now, Fred. We know you've got a fine brain, but there's no need to be nervous."

" But the gadget ?" wailed Fred.

" Yes, the gadget," said Miss Jones. " It's all very well for you to talk so confidently, but soft words gather no moss."

" Butter no parsnips," corrected her brother smoothly.

" Oh, damn this language. Well, you know what I mean."

" But I've got it settled. We will show Mr. Raebone a mooki doll."

" A mooki doll ?" echoed Fred mournfully.

" Why not ?" Abel beamed with self-satisfaction.

" Of *course*," said his sister. " Just the thing. I can run one up in an hour."

Fred looked dubious. " But how about this other problem ? I can't work in a state of nervous tension. After all, Abel, you're the front man, and—"

Abel Jones was smiling broadly now.

" Correction, please. I *was* the front man."

" Oh, stop being so damned mysterious," his sister told him.

" All right, then. Now listen . . ."

Chapter III

The first surprise Oscar had next morning was being offered a cigar by Mr. Jones. This he accepted and lit up. His second surprise was finding that it was a good one. He commented on its excellence to the big man.

" I am pleased," said Mr. Jones. " I realised yesterday that we had not been so hospitable as we should. You know, unpractical scientists and all that." He dug Oscar in the ribs. " Now, are you ready to see our humble shop ?"

" Lead on," said Oscar.

The big man shepherded him through the farther door. The blonde brought up the rear.

Oscar was surprised see that the shop was quite bare. A series of benches, a few odd pieces of apparatus, was all it held. A man was jiggering about with something on one of the benches.

" This is Mr. Smith, the third member of our enterprise. Mr. Smith, Mr. Raebone."

" How do you do ?" said Fred and returned to his work.

" Temperamental," said Mr. Jones with a wink as he led Oscar away. " He's the ideas man."

" Mm-mm," said Oscar, taking a puff of his cigar and looking around him. " There doesn't seem much going on here. I expected more, after all that apparatus you ordered."

" Well, we work a lot of it beyond capacity, you understand, then discard it."

" But all that money," Oscar said wonderingly.

The blonde cut in quickly.

" Perhaps you ought to show our guest the gadget."

" Ah yes. Then perhaps you will understand that our research has been directed toward a worthwhile end. Now

what do you think of this?" He led Oscar to a bench. On it was a flat doll.

" Now, watch," said Mr. Jones. He began whistling a tune.

The doll promptly clambered to its feet and began jigging up and down in a loose-limbed dance to the rhythm of the tune.

" How's that ?" asked Mr. Jones proudly. As he stopped whistling the doll stopped dancing and gracefully subsided.

Oscar sighed heavily to himself. How did this tie up with electronic equipment being driven beyond capacity ? He began to think that this bunch were really round the bend. But he concealed his thoughts politely.

" I'm afraid it's been done before, Mr. Smith. It's done with threads, nylon threads."

" *Ah*, but this isn't done with threads. It's self-contained."

" Really ?" Oscar's curiosity was suddenly piqued. " How *does* it work, then ?"

" Ah, that's our little secret. You see this little flat strip on the back ? That's an activator, responding to any audible beat. There definitely aren't any threads. Run your hands around it. Try it out. Anywhere."

Oscar took it to another bench. He began humming *Annabel Lee*. Promptly the little puppet began jigging away, for all the world like a tap dancer. He changed to another tune, a rumba. The doll changed tempo, too. It didn't perform a rumba, but its jerky movement was as comical in its way as the hip-jerk of the real thing.

" *Well*," Oscar said, turning back to the Joneses. " That's some idea you have. You've patented it, I presume ?"

" As a matter of fact," said the big man, " we haven't."

" And we don't intend to," his sister put in. " You see, we don't fear anyone else discovering the principle, so we have no need to protect it. Whereas, if we patented it we'd have to give a specification and other people could adapt it." She was speaking strictly off the cuff, but it seemed to convince their visitor.

" Mm-mm, that is a point. As long as you're sure nobody can dissect that activator. I'm agreeably surprised. Both at your foresight there and at the idea itself."

"I'm glad," said the big man. "But we realise our deficiencies when it comes to exploiting the idea. We need someone with knowledge of such matters. We need a manager, in fact." He

eyed Oscar speculatively. " Someone like yourself, for instance."

" Like me ?" said Oscar, taken by surprise.

" That's right, Mr. Raebone. I'm offering you the job. At a salary of—shall we say three thousand for a start ?"

" Er—well," faltered Oscar. He'd always spoken amongst his colleagues against this very thing, private industry tempting the Government's men with big money offers the Government couldn't match. But secretly he was rather flattered. Nobody had made *him* such an offer before. But—

" I'm afraid that's not possible, Mr. Jones. You see, I have a life career with the service. I entered straight from school and—" He had only vaguely noticed that the blonde had been fiddling with a piece of mechanism on the bench. Now he broke off at a humming from the gadget that lasted for a second then stopped with a click.

" Ye-es, Mr. Raebone," said Mr. Jones. " What were you saying ?"

Oscar frowned puzzledly. " What ? Oh yes, I was saying that I entered the service straight from school and that—" He was only slightly surprised to find himself hoisting his shoulders and saying, " And, hell, it's about time I had a change. All these years I've put in—and what have I been doing ? Snooping on people, fettering private enterprise. When I see people like you, striving to make dreams a reality, it makes me feel ashamed. And I don't mind admitting it. Mr. Jones, I'd consider it an honour to help."

Abel Jones clapped him on the shoulder. " That's the spirit, Mr. Raebone." He glanced at his sister with a look that Oscar interpreted as no more than one of simple pleasure. " So let me welcome you to our little outfit. You'll start right away ?"

For a moment Oscar had reservations. " Well, I'm on a monthly contract. And it would mean leaving my successor with a lot of unfinished work." His new enthusiasm, his new loyalty fought briefly with years of training and dedication. But it was a foredoomed struggle ; the years of dedication weren't backed by a superior science. " But let *them* worry about that. They've had enough of my life. I'll start right in tomorrow morning, how's that ?"

The look on the big man's face was almost seraphic. " That's fine, Mr. Raebone. That's just fine."

As soon as Oscar had gone, Abel Jones faced his sister and the saturnine Fred.

" What did I tell you ? It's a pushover. Mr. Raebone takes over my job tomorrow, and the three of us can get on with our real work in peace and contentment. Mr. Raebone will keep any other prying officials like his late self off the doorstep. He'll be the perfect front, and nobody will ever suspect *him.* Why didn't I think of this before ? It would have saved all the headaches, all our research into the fiendishly complicated laws and customs of these people."

Miss Jones smiled. " I have to hand it to you, brother. Ostensibly we shall be the respectable makers of childish novelties. Mr. Raebone will work industriously away at being business manager of a shadow business, and in six months—"

" In six months," said Fred Smith, even he reassured by now, " I push the switch. Out over Earth go the control waves, and every native human on the planet becomes a Mr. Raebone, only more so. Absolute slaves." He suddenly looked mournful again. " Really, it's too easy, isn't it ?"

The Joneses exchanged smiling glances. " And only yesterday," said the big man, " you were getting all agitated. It *is* easy. And it's humane. Nobody could ever accuse us of being a cruel race. We're only doing what we are because we have to. But painlessly, that's the important thing. With control there'll be no breeding, except for a few thousands to be the servants of our surplus population as they move in. It's poetic, really."

His sister laughed. " Ah me, I felt almost sorry for poor little Mr. Raebone. There he was, coming to a big decision—so *he* thought !"

Abel Jones echoed her laughter. " Soon nobody at all on this Earth will be making decisions any more—except us."

Oscar took up his duties next day with a fervour born of absolute loyalty. Having brooded over it all night he suggested that they call their product the Dinkum Dancing Doll. It wasn't a particularly inspired name, but Oscar was quite proud of it. Choosing a name for a commercial product seemed to symbolise his striking free the shackles of Government servitude. Abel Jones, for his part, couldn't have cared less, but he put on a convincing show of enthusiasm.

" Why, that's fine, Raebone."

" Then we'll register it, of course," said Oscar.

" Is that really essential yet ?"

" Of course. We've got to get moving. And I'd like a hundred prototypes of the Dinkum made up. How soon can you get them done ?"

" Hey, hold on," said Abel Jones. " You'll have to plan this out properly. We can't rush it. Why, it will take months to get organised." He looked sideways at Oscar. " Six months at least, I should think."

" *Six months* ?" said Oscar, almost scandalised. " That sounds too much like the Government talking, Mr. Jones, not private enterprise."

" Perhaps, but there's no violent hurry. I think we can afford six months' salary for you while you assimilate background. Cram up on the novelty trade. Order any books, trade papers you want."

" Oh, but I did that yesterday. I can study at nights. In the daytime I've got to push. There's going to be big rewards in this."

" How right you are," the big man murmured.

" Well then, how about those prototypes ? A dozen will do for a start. Can you manage that in a few days ?"

Abel Jones sighed resignedly. " Okay. Give me a week, will you ?"

" Good. Now—we'll have to talk over manufacturing costs. Processes, margins, etcetera."

" Yes—some other time, Raebone. I've got something else to attend to just now."

" Something *else* ?" Oscar looked puzzled, hurt almost. " But nothing could be more important than this, surely."

" Er—well, you see, I have to help Mr. Smith on another gadget. That's why I hired you, to take work off my shoulders."

" That's true, Mr. Jones. And, believe me, I'm going to do just that." He smiled. " One way to do that is to see that work is planned efficiently. You're the boss, Mr. Jones—don't think I'll ever forget that—but you're still the unpractical scientist, if you'll forgive my bluntness, and I'm the organiser. To take the burden off your shoulders I must have the background here. It can't be put off." Oscar's eyes shone brightly. " Yes *sir*, I'm going to earn my money. Now, first of all, processes—"

Abel Jones heaved a deep inward sigh. " All right, Raebone. Processes."

At three o'clock Abel Jones entered the basement laboratory and slumped into a chair.

" Reporting for work ?" his sister asked acidly. Twice she had tried to dislodge him from Oscar's solicitude, before giving it up as a bad job.

" *Hah* !" the big man said sourly. " I certainly shan't be reporting for work today—or this week. We aren't through costing the damned Dinkum doll yet. Mr. Raebone is certainly conditioned. He's so loyal and enthusiastic he's driving me crazy !"

" Maybe" suggested his sister, "we ought to give him full mind control treatment."

The big man roused himself. " No, we can't do that. He's got to be an ordinary Earth human, with ordinary Earth human reactions. Except, of course, for his complete loyalty to us and to our aims as he thinks he sees them. After all, that's what I hired him for, as a perfectly innocent-looking cover. An automaton would be useless."

" I suppose you're right. But it's going to hold work up."

The big man shrugged his massive shoulders and smiled. " Not for long. Another few days and Raebone will have all he wants to know. Then I'll be free to help you. Oh yes—he wants a dozen dolls made up as soon as possible—and a hundred all told, when you can."

" *A hundred* ! That's nearly a week's work !"

" *Please*—just to keep him quiet."

Chapter IV

Abel Jones's estimate of a few days was somewhat out. It was nearer three weeks before Oscar's devotion would let him go. Nor Abel Jones alone. His sister, too, found herself cornered whenever she showed her head above ground, and asked question after question concerning ways of fabricating the dolls as efficiently as possible.

Oscar's enthusiasm was unstoppable. " Are you sure *we're* not the conditioned ones ?" the blonde observed ruefully to her brother late one night after they had managed to get Oscar off the premises for a few hours. That, his reluctance to leave, was another symptom of his consuming loyalty that the three aliens found exasperating—and doubly so because they couldn't show it. Once the blonde ordered him to leave

in no uncertain terms, and such a puzzled look came into Oscar's face before he acceded—as he couldn't help doing—that her brother turned on her vehemently as soon as Oscar was out of the way.

" You fool ! You'll have to cut *that* out right away."

" And why ?" she demanded, her eyes blazing. " He's serving us, isn't he, not the other way round. I'm fed up with this. Here's Fred working in the lab downstairs getting longer and longer in the face, and I can't say I blame him. There's not much he can do on his own. I can't help it if I hurt Mr. Raebone's feelings. That's not the least bit important. Our work is."

Abel Jones breathed heavily. His urbanity was getting rather rough round the edges by now. " You mistake my motive, my dear sister. Haven't you ever heard of a loyalty neurosis ? It's what conditioned grades back home suffer from if their loyalty is frustrated. It ends in guilt, a feeling of insufficiently serving the dictates of the person's master—in the end, suicide even. And that's something we can't afford to have happening to our Mr. Raebone."

He shrugged and regained some of his normal composure. " No, we'll just have to put up with it. Another couple of days and we'll have everything cleared up for him to go ahead peddling Dinkum Dancing Dolls to his heart's content, while we get on with the good work."

" Am I looking forward to that !" he sister sighed. "Printing, promotion, packaging, standardisation—I'm fed up with the whole farce of it. And the manufacture !—do you know he wants to fill half the floor space with machinery ?"

" Well, let him," her brother said expansively. " After all, we don't need it." He winked and pointed downward to the basement. " Not this floor, anyway. Besides, it'll keep him busy, mop up all that excess loyalty without getting in our hair. By the time he's got the machines installed and ready to run, by the time he's got orders—*if* he gets any—by the time he gets into production—" he smiled hugely—" *we*'ll be in production—once and for all."

Three months later and Abel Jones was rubbing his hands.

" Well, we've still got another four months to go on the transmitter, but at last we're free of Mr. Raebone. By the way, have you seen the little man lately ?"

" Please," said his sister with a surprising show of annoyance " don't refer to him as a little man. I think he's rather brave."

" O-oh ?" said her brother, his eyes narrowing. " You *have* seen him, then ?"

" Yes, once or twice. And he's beating his head against a wall. Nobody seems interested in the doll. He's worn himself to a shadow, trying to show it to every toy wholesaler in London. They've all turned him down."

" Good ! That couldn't be better ! Let him beat his head against the wall for another four months, then he'll be out of his misery."

" What do you mean by that ?"

" Only that he won't have any more headaches to worry about. You know, beating his head against a wall . . . headaches—"

" Oh, stop trying to be so funny. He thinks he's doing something fine and worthwhile, and all the time—"

A door slammed above them.

" That must be him now," she said. She started to her feet.

" Where are you going ?" her brother demanded sharply.

" I'm going up to see him."

" Just a minute. Sit down. What's going on here ?"

" What do you mean—' going on ' ?"

" Why this sudden solicitude for Mr. Raebone ?"

His sister regarded him coolly. " You said yourself that you didn't want anything to happen to him."

" That was in a different context—if he was frustrated by his own masters. I didn't mean his failure due to outside circumstances. I know more about conditioned psychology than you. A conditioned person knows he's doing his best, so in this case there's no danger of a loyalty neurosis. But that's not so important as—"

The big man was interrupted by a clumping noise from upstairs. It sounded just as if someone were stamping around agitatedly.

The blonde jumped to her feet again, her face suddenly pale. " All the same, I'm going up to see what's wrong." She paused at the door and turned warningly to her brother. " And don't think you know every bloody thing. Otherwise *you'll* be the biggest danger to this mission, not me."

She ran up the stairs to the ground floor. The clumping sound momentarily stopped, then started again to the accom-

paniment of a wild chant.

She stopped at the office door.

" Mr. Raebone? Are you all right?"

There was a scuffling sound and a noise as if someone had fallen over a piece of furniture. Then the door opened and Oscar's face gaped out. He was swaying.

" Mr. Raebone, what's the matter?"

" Matter? Awsh—nothing. Nothingatall. I've been—*hup* !—jusht havin' a drink. Come in and have one."

The girl who called herself Mary Jones, but whose name on another world was something far more exotic, heaved a knowing sigh. The drinks on her own world were rather more exotic, too, than the whisky which Oscar, by the aroma of him, had been imbibing—but the effects were the same.

" Here," she said, and helped Oscar into a chair. She closed the office door behind them. " What you want is some coffee." She crossed to the machine that Oscar had installed to sustain him through his long hours of work. While she waited for it to heat she sat down facing him.

" Was it tough today?" she asked softly.

" Tough? *Today*? Huh !"

" Look," she said, surprised at her own earnestness. " You mustn't get so depressed. Nothing's as important as all that."

" Important? Course it's important. Have a drink. No?" He shook his head and poured himself a generous one. " It's bloody important. Eh? Depressed?" He threw his head back and laughed uproariously. " What did you think I was doin'? A dance of death? I should think so ! I was doin' a dance of victory."

" You mean you got an order?"

" Order? That's funny. Everything's funny tonight. We don't take orders, we give 'em. Don't we?"

She suddenly froze. " What do you mean?"

" Project Research—*hup* !—we're the bosses, aren't we?"

Saa hunen vridenkl ! the blonde thought, *he's found out* ! Somehow, incomprehensibly, this innocent-seeming tool of her brother's plan had found the whole thing out ! To cover her agitation she fussed with the coffee machine.

" Here, drink this," she said unsteadily. " Just what did you mean about giving orders?"

Oscar's eyes suddenly gained focus. " Only this. We've got something in this Dinkum doll that's better than anything on the market. It's what the toy trade call a winner. The toy

trade lives on winners. They're all looking for winners. They all claim they've got one. So nobody takes any notice of me. Who am I? *Nobody*. They've never heard of me. They don't want to see something new from me. They're keeping their credit dry till someone they know turns up with a winner.

" Who do they think they are?" Oscar smote his desktop with a vehemence that set coffee cup and whisky glass dancing like a Dinkum. " Sitting in their poky little dusty offices behind the City Road ! 'Struth, you never saw such a narrow-minded mob ! Talk about the benevolent uncles, making toys for the kiddiewiddies ! All they're after is the loot, and they're too stupid to see that when it's shoved under their noses.

" Nope, from now on I'm goin' to show 'em. You know what, my girl?" He took a noisy gulp at the hot black coffee. " I've taken the biggest stand at the Cheltenham Toy Fair next week, smack in the entrance. There's just going to be this stand, all painted gold, and one Dinkum Doll on a table. The table's goin' to be made of glass and stand on one duralumin leg, so they can see there's no strings. That's all. Oh yes—" he leered, "—and me, with a dirty big order book."

The blonde let out her breath. Oscar had been so dithyrambic that she had only just realised that he hadn't in fact found out the truth about Project Research after all. In her relief she warmed to Oscar's plan.

" That's it, Oscar, you show 'em !"

" Oscar ! She called me Oscar ! You're all right, Miss Jones. I'm goin' to make you all rich, you bet ! I'm goin' to make you happy, you and Mr. Jones and even Mr. Smith. Imagine making Mr. Smith happy? Hup !—What am I sayin' ?".

But the blonde laughed. Even the loyalty effect could be tempered by alcohol. " He *is* a misery, isn't he? But he has a fine brain."

" Oh, yeh. He's the brains, and Mr. Jones is the arm, and you—you're the beautiful face. That's right. And you know what I am? I'm the devoted slave of all of you. Only—" his head had slumped onto his arms, and he peered up with one surprisingly bright eye—" only I'm more of a devoted slave to the beautiful face. Miss Jones, you're a beautiful and anderstunding, I mean, standerund—, I—"

The bright eye disappeared. Miss Jones smiled gently and brushed away a tear from her own. She stood looking at Oscar

for a moment, then tiptoed from the office, putting the light off on the way.

It was a shamefaced Oscar who sought out Miss Jones in the morning.

" I—I hope you'll forgive me. For last night, I mean."

Miss Jones smiled. " There was nothing to forgive."

" I—I wasn't sure. It's—" he put a trembling hand to his head—" it's a bit hazy this morning. I didn't offend you ?"

" No. The reverse."

" Really !" Oscar's hangover seemed to drop from him like magic. " You've no idea how that heartens me. I'll need that. For the Toy Fair, I mean. I did tell you about that, didn't I ?"

Miss Jones chuckled. " Yes."

" It's going to be tough. I may have talked big last night, but these toy buyers are cagey. It's not going to be easy. I want to talk it over with Mr. Jones as soon as possible."

" I've told him about it."

" You have ? What does he say ?"

" That you have all his support." That wasn't exactly it ; what he had actually said was, " Beautiful. That'll get him out of our hair for a couple of weeks."

" *Good.* You know—don't think I'm being disloyal—but I've felt sometimes as if Mr. Jones weren't entirely with this sometimes. I'm glad he realises that this Fair is the crisis for us. Big orders come in there from all over the world. Now, I've got to see the stand contractors."

Chapter V

Abel Jones smote his forehead, which was a distinct purple in hue at this moment.

" Look at this !" He thrust the telegram into his sister's hand. She read it.

ORDERS POURING IN. COME AT ONCE. SUITE RESERVED. CHEERS. RAEBONE.

" What does the idiot want me for ?" Jones barked.

" Perhaps he can't cope with all the orders," his sister suggested sweetly. " You'd better go. You don't want Mr. Raebone cutting his throat right on the Dinkum Doll stand." Her voice suddenly caught on the note of levity. " Shall *I* go?"

Her brother glared at her. " Look—get this straight—this mission of ours has cut us off from our own society. You

may have urges that you can't subdue, but for heaven's sake sublimate them in your work here. If you need male companionship for an hour or two there's always Vensl—hell ! I mean Fred."

His sister slapped his face hard.

" Wha— !"

" In case you wondered what that was for, it's for suggesting one, that I could harbour any affection for Fred ; two, that I'd betray our mission for personal reasons ; three, that I've fallen in love with—" She faltered.

" Ye-es," he brother prompted.

" Three, that's my business," she finished defiantly. "But I'm still a Vranian. And our mission depends on Mr. Raebone."

" In that case, it's immaterial who goes to hold his hand. So—" his voice was mocking—" *I*'ll go."

" All right." His sister shrugged, concealing her annoyance. She thought of what Oscar must be feeling now. " Abel, let him have his little hour of triumph. It won't interfere with our mission."

" Certainly," her brother beamed. But he had other ideas

" I couldn't get away from the stand to say hello," Oscar exclaimed breathlessly. " See this ? It's been like this since the Fair opened. Fifty thousand gross already."

" Gross ? How many nett ?"

Oscar grinned. " They sell by the gross in this trade. That makes over seven million."

" *How many* ?" Jones staggered, and two tiny Japanese buyers were nearly trampled underfoot in the shock-wave that ran through the throng that pressed round the stand.

" We've broken through," said Oscar proudly.

" We have ?" said Jones grimly. " Ah, now that I'm here, take the rest of the day off. You must be worn out."

" I am, rather. Still, all in a good cause, eh, A.J.?" He made his way out through the crowd.

" Three thousand gross," said a man as big as Abel Jones himself. His voice was guttural.

" We can't deliver inside eighteen months," Jones barked.

The visitor beamed. *Stupid foreigner*, thought Jones.

" In that case make it six thousand. We shall need at least that many by then."

Jones scowled. " We want references for that size of order."

" That will hardly be necessary," said the man suavely. " My card."

Jones took it. It read, quite simply : *Soviet Recreational Purchasing Bureau.*

Jones gulped. Where was this going to end ?" " Certainly, sir," he muttered.

By that evening, despite being as objectionable as he could, Jones had taken orders for eleven thousand gross. He found Oscar in the restaurant, in animated conversation with a dozen buyers over a table loaded with delicacies.

" Ah, here's the great A.J. himself," Oscar announced. "The man responsible for the Dinkum."

Something like a cheer rose up. Jones had one last throw. " Parasites," he snarled.

There was a roar, but of laughter. " What a character !" somebody yelped.

Jones snorted and took one of the dozen chairs that were thrust in front of him.

" I'd like you to meet Miss Suzie Fotheringshaw, pronounced Bubbles," said one of the company, thrusting a gurgling redhead almost into Abel's lap. The man winked. " And in case you want to return her, she comes from the Shur-Thing Novelty Wholesale Company. My card."

Abel gave up resisting. He was trapped here for a week. There was no sense in wasting it.

Their return, a week later, was flashbulbs all the way. Abel, surfeited with good food and wine and an assortment of feminine company, was in a slight daze.

" Well, they may be a backward lot," as he explained to his sister, " and be riddled with customs and taboos, but they certainly know how to let their hair down."

" What was that you said before you left about urges ?" his sister commented sweetly.

Her brother fell into a coughing fit. " Those damned cigars," he muttered, and pulled himself together. " How's the work been going ?"

" What work ? Fred's been prostrate all week, because of the callers we've had. His paranoia's been rather troublesome."

" Damn the idiots back home for saddling us with a paranoiac on this job of all things. I don't care how brilliant a scientist he is. I'll give him a good talking to. This publicity won't harm us ; it's simply a test of our efficient concealment, and we've come through with flying colours."

" But how about the army of workers that Mr. Raebone will now sign up to turn out the thirty million Dinkum Dolls he's sold ? I can't imagine Fred being able to stand all those feet over his head."

" Do you think I haven't thought that out ? Please stop treating me as if I've been neglecting our mission just because I've been away junketing for a week. I had to go, you know that. I'm going to see Raebone right away."

His face was carefully grave as he faced Oscar in his office.

" That's the truth of it. It was all a dream, a great big beautiful dream. The money's run out."

Oscar looked close to tears. " But it can't, A.J. This is too big for it to be stopped now."

" I'm afraid that's how it is. You were right about us in the first place—just unpractical scientists. I can see your contract out, but there's no more for materials or wages or those machines you told me we still need. Too bad, and—er, well, thanks for all your efforts."

On which pathetic note A.J. left Oscar's office, rubbing his hands jubilantly once he was in the corridor outside.

" I've done it," he told his sister. " I've cut all this nonsense off at the root."

Two hours later he was interrupted, in the middle of helping his sister with mounting a huge cathode ray tube into the transmitter, by a great hollering from upstairs.

Forgetting himself, he uttered a loud Vranian oath. " He's done it ! He's committed suicide. Why by all the suns couldn't he do it quietly ?" He saw his sister's reproachful look. " All right. I'll go up and see."

He found Oscar very much alive. " Just a few papers for you to sign, A.J."

" Papers ? What papers ? Winding-up papers ?"

Oscar beamed. " No, *sir*. There's not going to be any winding up of Project Research Ltd. You know, the first bank I went to all but rolled the red carpet out for me. When I showed them the order book they agreed to advance the money immediately."

" How—how much ?" said A.J. faintly. *I'll spend it quickly*, he thought feverishly, *I'll order five hundred cathode ray tubes, anything—*

" As much as we want up to four million," Oscar answered with a huge smile. " Now, A.J., if you'll just sign here. And here . . . "

Chapter VI

It was a fine October afternoon, just seventeen months after Oscar had been " hired " by Project Research Ltd. A.J., still big and burly, but with his old urbanity worn to tatters, had just had peace restored to his soul. His sister had just come into his office and announced that Fred would be ready to push the switch in twenty-four hours time.

" At last," A.J. exulted. " After coping with five hundred workers clumping around the place, interviews with countless newspapers, not to mention Fred's two attacks of paranoid dementia, we've done it." He let out a huge sigh.

" You've got more out of it than that," his sister reminded him, casting her eye round the sumptuous office.

" Oh, yes, I'll admit that." His gaze dwelt on the *Time* cover framed on the wall—" *Mr. Santa Claus.*" How did that report begin ? " *Gargantuan, craggy Abel Jones came from nowhere to be the all-time baron of the toy trade*—" and a page besides. " Ye-es, I'll miss it. It won't be the same after the switch goes down. I thought the Toy Fair was something, but that dinner they gave me ! A whole weekend for a dinner ! The girls ! No, it won't be the same when they're just slaves. And the workers' bowling team. And the social club." He sighed.

" It won't be the same for any of us," his sister said sadly.

" Oh now, brisk up ! You'll still have Oscar. Poor old Oscar !"

" I haven't got Oscar," his sister replied hotly. " I never have had. How can I tell whether he really likes me or whether it's just his conditioning ? Couldn't we make an exception in his case ? Take off the conditioning just so that I could find out ?"

" He'd still be subject to the big wave when it starts going out tomorrow."

" You could build a screen for him," she pleaded.

" There isn't time."

" Well, afterwards."

" The Commission would execute both of us. Don't forget, they'll be the first to arrive. They wouldn't tolerate an unconditioned Earthman wandering loose—nor *us* if we let that happen. Besides—"

" Just let me have him for a few hours. Let me de-condition him for that time."

A.J. sighed. "I know how you feel. But, I was just going to say, suppose he doesn't really care for you? How would you feel then? Wouldn't it be a mockery to have him a slave afterwards?"

His sister seemed close to tears. "I—I'll have to take the chance."

She found Oscar in the factory.

"Can I see you for a moment?"

"Why, certainly, Miss Jones."

They walked out of the noise of machinery. Miss Jones came straight to the point.

"How about our taking the rest of the day off?"

"Oh, I don't think I could. There's a bottleneck on line three, and I really—"

"Oscar—you said once that you were slaves of us all but more of a slave to me."

"Did I *really* say that? I know when you mean—that night when I had too much to drink. I've often wondered since then just what I did say—or whether I only dreamed it all."

"You said it, and lots of other nice things."

"Then I'll come if you want me to."

"Now, that's downright ungallant." But, seeing the conflict of loyalties he was in, she didn't persist, but laughed gently. "But first, I want you to come this way."

The deconditioning went without a hitch. Soon they were speeding through Hertfordshire in Abel's Jaguar. Oscar drove. From time to time Mary glanced at him, but he showed no change. The loyalty to Project Research was so ingrained by now that there was surely no change to be expected. She had hardly expected him to shake his fist at the factory. But why was he so silent? He certainly had a blissful look on his face. Was just driving along with her sufficient happiness for him while it lasted? Or was she kidding herself?

Night had fallen by the time they pulled up—at an ancient country pub.

"Heavens!" Oscar exclaimed as they entered the warmly-lit interior. "We're in Northamptonshire."

"How do you know?"

Oscar nodded to one end of the bar. "See that leather-covered thing like a big armchair? That's table skittles. They

only play it in Northamptonshire—as far as I know. I was born in this part of the world. Come on, I'll give you a game."

That began an evening such as Mary Jones or Frynya Saythol, as she had been known on a faraway world—had never known. What with learning how to throw the cheeses, which was harder than it looked, joking with the locals who gradually filled up the bar—above all, the tangy country beer—she felt such a glow that the thought of what would happen to all these delightful people the next day seemed, not humane, but horrible.

It wasn't until the pub had shut, to the echoing of goodbyes on the crisp air, that she and Oscar were alone. Oscar parked the car before they had gone far and began talking. It was as if he had been bottling it up for a long long time. He told her all she longed to know. It was obvious that his feelings for her were entirely separate from any conditioning. Yet tomorrow absolute conditioning would descend upon him for good—upon him and all this warm world of people—so different from the purposive planet of Vran.

" I owe all of you so much," Oscar was saying. " You and your brother, yes and even Mr. Jones if he's the brain behind what we've achieved. That second morning when I came to your factory—it happened then. It was just as if some purpose came into my life. I know the Dinkum Doll is a winner, but even with a winner in this world it isn't easy. And all that struggle to break through was only for one purpose—"

" Please, no more, Oscar darling," she implored, no longer able to bear his talking of the Dinkum Doll enterprise. It had meant so much to him, it had shown him to her for what he was—a pillar of strength and resource. After all, conditioning couldn't bring out what wasn't there. And all the time—

" I understand," said Oscar softly, misinterpreting her. He folded her in his arms. And Mary knew that he didn't understand, but no longer cared—for that or anything else, except being very close to him.

It was nine o'clock in the morning when the Jaguar rolled into the forecourt of Project Research. Oscar was quietly but deliriously happy. Mary's heart was full of gratitude—and a huge regret.

" Ah well, back to the bench," said Oscar blithely. " But

as soon as I get everything tied up here I'll ask A.J. for a week or two off—and we'll fly to Majorca or Capri—just the two of us."

But Mary only turned away and ran into the building. She went straight to her brother's office. He wasn't there. She went down to the lab. Her brother and Fred were bending over the transmitter.

"When does it go on?" she demanded.

Her brother straightened, hollow of eye. "It's been on for an hour."

"It has? · But—" Her head whirled. An Oscar put back under conditioning couldn't have been heretical enough to talk of a holiday as he had just now.

"Read this," her brother said grimly, thrusting a newspaper under her nose. The headline leaped up at her:

ONE SECRET WEAPON FOILED

There's one secret weapon that no enemy can ever use—thought control. Because Britain has found the antidote before anybody else has found the weapon! Britain will never use the weapon but neither can any other power. The Government revealed last night that an interference wave against any use of this weapon has been in existence for a month now. The weapon is what are called Zone Waves. These were discovered by Dr. Alan Cruthe, a physicist at the University of Aberystwyth. The exact location of these waves in the spectrum and their form are not revealed, but Dr. Cruthe says that he stumbled upon them by accident some two years ago. He had discovered that the waves had strange effects on experimental animals, but was only alerted to their possible use as a weapon when—(*Contd. p.* 2).

Mary looked up, her mind wild with surmise.

"This means—?"

Her brother nodded grimly. "That all our work has been wasted." He looked up at the vast bulk of the transmitter. "We've tried. It's the Savyn Effect. They've beaten us. All gone for nothing—this, the scout expeditions, the years of our cramming up on Earth customs. How can we go back?"

"If it hadn't been for your damned Mr. Raebone . . ." Fred wailed mournfully.

Mary shot him a hostile glance, then to hide her burgeoning joy, made a show of ruffling through the paper. "Perhaps

there's something more here. Perhaps we can alter the carrier wave form."

" Impossible," Fred snarled.

Mary suddenly stopped rifling. On page two there was a picture. She stared at it uncomprehendingly. Then slowly she began to laugh. Her laughter mounted until she was shaking. The two men gaped at her.

" There's something suspicious going on," Fred yelped. " Did *you* betray us ?"

" No-ho-ho," Mary squeezed out between gusts of laughter. " W-we did. See ?"

She held the paper up.

"A—a—a—" Fred stuttered.

" A *Dinkum Doll* !" A.J. bellowed.

" Exactly," Mary said, her spasms subsiding. She read, " The discoverer ' *was only alerted to their use as a weapon when he bought a Dinkum Doll for his daughter, Eunice, aged three. He suddenly saw an Englishman dancing to the tune of a foreign power* '."

" Well, I'll be—" said A.J.

" Atomised when the Commission catches up on us," Fred said gloomily.

" You think the Commission will bother with three failures like us ?" said A.J. " We'll send a subspace message that we've been discovered. They'll leave us to our fate. They won't risk their own necks coming here." He brightened. " We're all three of us in the same boat, so I don't mind coming out into the open. I *like* this world. I like the language. They've even got an expression for this—we've been hoist by our own pewter ! But I've just realised I like being a tycoon, even though it messed up our mission. And I *like* being called A.J."

" I think I'm going to have another attack," Fred moaned.

" Oh, lay off it, Fred," A.J. told him genially. " Cheer up, there'll be plenty of opportunities here for you. You've been too busy down here in the dungeons to taste the fruits of Earth. But you'll find them. And what do you say, Mary ?"

But Mary had already given her answer, seconds since. By now she was out of the lab, on her way to Oscar to tell him that their holiday could begin right away.

—Arthur Sellings

DEATH OF A TELEPATH

by GEORGE CHAILEY

It was impossible to murder a telepath—
but this one was very dead—
and not accidentally.

McClane watched the two-man spacestation spin into view, a shining disk against the black backdrop. He fired his jets briefly, to match speed, and operated magnetic clamps; the airlock of his ship married that of the satellite.

He rose and stretched, a big man with red hair, his massive face liberally sprinkled with freckles. Waiting for the lock to fill, he thought bitterly of his situation—promotion due and he had to get a job like this . . .

He stepped through to see a thin, white-coated figure with a high forehead and pale, watery eyes. McClane produced a badge from his grey uniform ; rank, it stated, Detective-Patrolman.

" I'm Burke," said the thin figure, thrusting out a bony hand.

McClane ignored it.

" Where's the body ?"

" In the power room. I haven't touched anything, naturally."

McClane grunted. In his experience, such behaviour was definitely *not* natural.

" I haven't been inside," Burke assured him.

" I suppose you loved him like a brother ?"

" No. I hated him. You can understand that—"

McClane could. No-one loved a telepath, except another telepath. No-one enjoyed the knowledge that his most intimate thoughts were an open book and, in consequence, telepaths were universally hated.

" This way," Burke said.

The corridor was a hollow cylinder, ten feet across ; at the far end was a solid door with a red light shining over it.

McClane began to struggle into a protective suit.

" All right," he grunted. " Let's have your version, Burke."

" When I came off shift, Forster went in—"

" Green showing ?"

" Of course. The door can't be opened if the radiation is above a certain level. I have the circuits here."

He pushed a bundle of papers at McClane, who thrust them into his pocket.

" Go on."

" I went to my cabin to rest—"

" Did you leave it, for any reason at all ?"

" No. Not till my rest period had ended. Then I returned to find red burning. Forster was nowhere on the station, so he had to be inside. I called H.Q.—"

" Forster's in there, still ?"

" Presumably. There's nowhere else he can be."

McClane tightened the last clamp on his suit and gestured at the door. Burke switched off the safety circuit and retreated.

The door opened easily. McClane ducked through and slammed it behind him. The shields were down and the room lit by a weird glow from the pile.

Carefully touching nothing else, he rammed the shields back in place and started the flushing mechanism. Then he looked at the body. Forster lay face down midway between the door and the pile, and his position clearly showed that he'd been running hard when he came through. He was pint-sized, shrivelled, and stubby fingers covered his face, clawing upward at the tendril-hairs.

McClane prised the hands loose and studied an expression of terror.

Continued on Page 112

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The satellite was isolated ; only Burke and Forster had lived and worked here. One human, the other telepath—a set-up for violent emotions. Burke hating, and the other knowing it.

McClane chewed over the situation. It was axiomatic in his department that no human could ever murder a telepath. It was impossible to keep such thoughts hidden ; the victim *knew* . . . and so telepaths bore a charmed life.

Only this one was dead in circumstances that looked suspicious to McClane. The shields down. Forster running—not away from the unprotected pile—*but towards it.*

How the devil had Burke managed it ?

McClane took a last look at the body and went outside. He wanted to study circuits.

The wiring was simple. The door of the power room could only be operated when radiation was at a safe level, and then a green light burned. If the level rose, the light changed to red and the door automatically locked. So Forster must have entered before the shields went down . . .

McClane mentally transposed two pair of wires. It was possible to rig the circuits, he realised, and straight away went to check the wiring points. He found everything in order and no tell-tale scratches, but the idea persisted in his head. The chamber could have been a death trap.

But—McClane came up against the basic problem—Forster could read Burke's mind. He would *know.*

" Satisfied ?" asked a dry voice.

McClane turned to see Burke watching him at the junction-box.

" No," he said, and glanced down at his wrist-watch. "Tell it again, from the beginning."

Burke repeated his story, ending with : " Suicide, then ? I know he was feeling depressed about something."

McClane grunted.

" Forster was sleeping immediately before his turn of duty ?"

" I imagine so." Burke smiled slightly, and McClane became aware that his eyes wandered. He couldn't seem to keep them off the wall. In a rack on the wall was the emergency winding handle for manual operation of the airlock—ideal for a blunt instrument, McClane thought professionally.

"You never opened the door of the power room after Forster went in?"

"I never went near it."

"A telepath could read your mind," McClane warned.

"In law, that's not legal evidence," Burke said promptly.

McClane began to dust the winding handle for prints.

"I've handled it recently," Burke admitted. "Routine test—you'll find it logged."

"Thought of everything, haven't you?"

Burke sneered. "You'll never convince a jury that I killed him. No human ever killed a telepath, that's axiomatic."

"After this," McClane said, "we'll be changing a few axioms."

"You have a theory?"

"I know how you did it, if that's what you mean. You overlooked one detail, and that's enough to send you to Curative."

Burke's eyes dilated. He held his breath.

"Bluff!"

McClane stared him down.

"You let down the shields and turned the chamber into a death-trap, while Forster was sleeping. You changed over the wiring so the lamp showed green and the door could be opened. He couldn't know what was in your mind until he woke . . . and then you were thinking of something quite different.

Continued on Page 114

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" You were thinking furiously of attacking him with the winding handle. A telepath fears one thing more than anything else—damage to his tendrils. That's worse than death for them, for they lose their faculty for thought transference.

" Forster got the one danger reading. A specific danger, overriding all else, and he panicked. He ran for the security of the power room . . . and ran straight into a blast of radiation. Then you changed back the wiring and called us."

Burke licked his lips.

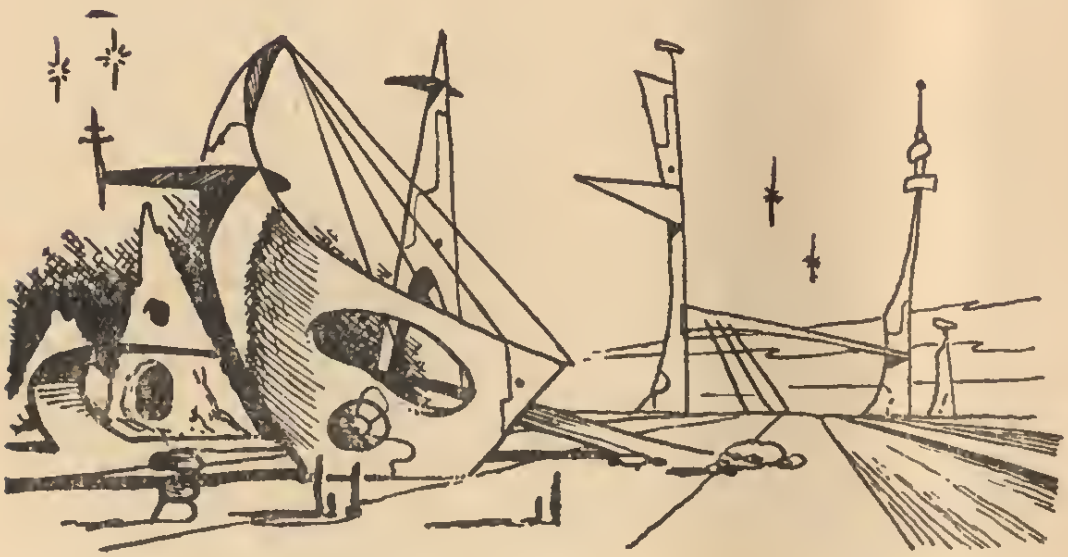
" That's nice," he said. " Tell me, what did I forget ?"

" The door. You said twice that you never went near the power room and Forster died too fast to close it after him. You closed it. Only you *could* have closed it."

McClane laid a big hand on Burke.

" Let's go," he said.

—George Chailey



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